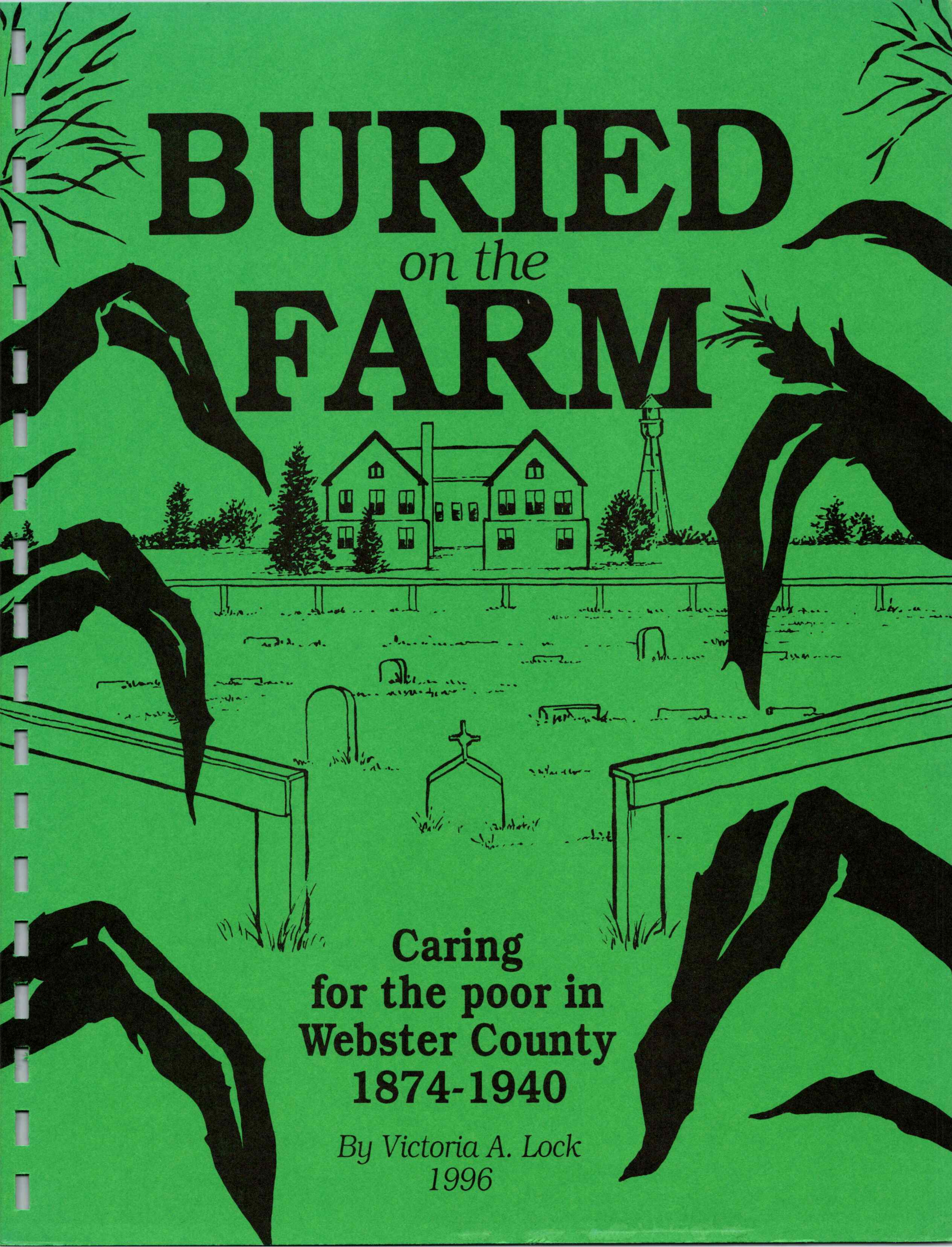


BURIED

on the

FARM



Caring
for the poor in
Webster County
1874-1940

By Victoria A. Lock
1996

“Buried on the Farm”:
Caring for the Poor in Webster County, 1874-1940

Researched by
Victoria A. Lock
1996

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In the fall of 1993, while cleaning the attic, staff of Webster Health Care discovered several very old crumbling ledgers dating from the late 1800's. I took them to my room, where I examined them from time to time during the next several months finding them fascinating. An idea began to form in my mind about extracting information from them for an historical account of the early days of the facility. Not many facilities can brag about being in continuous operation meeting the needs of the indigent for over 120 years, but this one can!! I wondered how and why it was begun, who had been served here over the years, and how the programs and methods of service delivery had changed.

Eventually, I discussed the nature of the ledgers with my friend, Eva Yost. The next thing I knew, in February of 1994, Eva had arranged a luncheon with Mr. Gordon Hendrickson of the State Historical Society of Iowa to discuss preservation of the old records and the development of a manuscript history from the records.

Eva felt strongly that history belongs to all citizens and must be made available whenever possible. Thus, she continued her campaign to encourage me to pursue the development of the manuscript history of the treatment of the poor over the years in Webster County. She wanted current and future citizens to be able to review, visualize and learn from the way things were.

Eva passed away on October 15, 1995.

This manuscript is dedicated to her, would never have existed without her tenacity and serves as one small piece of her legacy to citizens of Webster County.

Linda Smith

Acknowledgments

Throughout this project, the staff at the Webster County Care Facility, especially Director Linda Smith, have been most gracious, friendly and helpful. Laurie Hagey offered insight, gathered material for the database and flagged important comments in the documents. Members of the community of Fort Dodge offered assistance and resources as well, especially Roger Natte, Professor of Social Science at Iowa Central Community College, who graciously shared his notes and insights. Resources were gathered from the Fort Dodge Community Library, the Webster County Clerk and the Fort Dodge Museum and at all these sites the staff provided expert assistance.

Victoria A. Lock
Middle Amana, Iowa

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About the Author

Victoria Lock is a Ph.D. candidate in the American Studies program at the University of Iowa. She lives in Middle Amana, Iowa, where she is working on a study of the landscape of the Amana Inspirationists Community.

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| | |
|--|----------------------------|
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On January 22, 1874, a twenty-three year old Iowa woman stood on the threshold of a new home with her two young sons, aged three years and one year. But she was hardly celebrating, for desperation led her to the new home they entered that day—the recently constructed Webster County Poor Farm. They joined another county resident, a forty-seven year old Irish immigrant laborer, as its first residents.¹

Few written records remain to explain the circumstances that led these county residents to seek public relief. The poor farm *Infirmity Register*, minutes from the board of supervisors meetings found in early newspapers, county records of the insane and sheriff's dockets provide pieces of the larger county-wide picture. These records fail to detail the personal tragedies that led to commitment to the poor farm. Yes, they were poor, but so were other Webster County residents. Traditionally, poor residents received help from the county in the form of public outdoor relief, but the cost of supporting the poor in the county was increasingly becoming a large burden on taxpayers. The poorhouse and farm were constructed to care for the county's poor more cheaply. Soon the young woman, her children and the Irish laborer were joined by others whose problems were more complicated than economic hardship. These residents were the first to experience a new form of "poor relief" in Webster County.

One month after the young woman and her two boys arrived, another forty-seven year old Irish immigrant was admitted by the order of the marshall. The *Register* describes the new inmate with these chilling remarks: "Occupation: Dog Killer, Keep him away from the pups if you want to save the dogs." How long the "dog killer" stayed on the farm is unknown; the *Register* lists no date of release.²

By establishing a poor farm and constructing a home to house the poor and mentally ill in 1874, Webster County joined a growing number of Iowa counties in seeking an economical solution to providing for the poor.

Poor Relief

The history of the care of the poor in Iowa mirrors many other Midwestern states. The Iowa Territorial Act of 1842, patterned after Ohio's, designated the township trustees as "township relief authorities." This act gave township trustees the authority to grant outdoor relief to the poor, order admission to the poorhouse (if one existed), and force a relative to pay for the

support of the poor.³

In 1851, Iowa legislators shifted some of the control over poor relief to the county judges. The judge was named as the investigator of the poor, patterned after New York's state laws. The township trustees remained primarily responsible for poor relief recommendations, but these were approved by the judge. The county judge could also order the erection of a poorhouse after estimating the cost and allowing citizens to vote on the expenditure at the county election. When Webster County was formally organized in 1853, the county judge had the authority to establish a poorhouse, but no action was taken until Webster County Supervisors put the question on the ballot in 1872.

In 1860, the system was altered again, as circuit courts replaced the county judges. The county boards of supervisors became responsible for the poor in their counties. The circuit court assumed responsibility for forcing relatives of the poor to pay for their support. Township trustees continued to make recommendations for outdoor relief and admission into the poorhouse, but all relief was approved by the board of supervisors. The supervisors acted on these recommendations and let contracts for the boarding of the poor and the establishment of a poorhouse. The circuit court, and later the district court, retained authority to force a poor resident's relatives to pay for his or her support. The Code of Iowa also required the supervisors to gain voters' support for a proposal to build a poorhouse if the amount required exceeded \$2,000. This was the procedure used by the Webster County Board of Supervisors in 1872.

This proclamation appeared in the minutes of the September 2, 1872, Webster County Board of Supervisors' meeting:

Board of Supervisors of Webster Co., Iowa in the question of voting
a tax for the purchasing a poor farm in said county. . . \$6,000 total sum,
election November 5, 1872.⁴

The results of the November election showed that the county overwhelmingly supported the purchase of a poor farm. The *Fort Dodge Messenger* reported the results by township on November 14, 1872:

Vote Returns:

For purchasing poor farm 677
Against purchasing poor farm 273

By Township
Deer Creek

For
3

Against
11

| | | |
|------------|-----|----------------|
| Dayton | 51 | 65 |
| Elkhorn | 1 | 24 |
| Jackson | 3 | 11 |
| Douglas | 15 | 7 |
| Fulton | 21 | 2 |
| Gowrie | 8 | - |
| Hardin | 28 | - |
| Johnson | 39 | 9 |
| Lost Grove | 8 | 1 |
| Otho | 33 | 5 |
| Sumnar | 20 | 22 |
| Washington | 103 | - |
| Webster | 24 | 13 |
| Yell | 33 | 3 ⁵ |

During the following year, the county purchased 160 acres in Elkhorn Township to provide for the establishment of the farm. Ironically, the voters of Elkhorn Township had not supported its establishment in the November election. In September 1873, the county supervisors heard a verbal report from the poorhouse committee - Mr. Pratt and Mr. Beecher (supervisors) describing a plan to "procure plans and let contract for its erection."⁶ The county was preparing to build a structure or structures on the land to house the poor and to operate a farm. At the October 1873 meeting, the supervisors appointed Mr. Landin as the Superintendent of the Poor Farm. Among other duties, he was instructed to purchase supplies and furniture. The building was probably not yet constructed when Mr. Landin was appointed, since the appropriation of the funds for the "erection of the poorhouse and improvements on the farm" were not approved until a special meeting on November 1, 1873.⁷

The work of completing the first poorhouse would not go smoothly for the supervisors. On December 10, 1873, another special meeting was called to resolve issues with the poor farm contractor, Israel Jenkins. The minutes show that the contractor had failed to complete the building according to the contract.⁸ Finally, just twenty-two days before the first "inmates" arrived at the door, the Webster County Supervisors agreed to settle the contract with Jenkins. It isn't clear whether the building was ever completed to the supervisors' satisfaction, since the record only indicates that they would "accept the poorhouse and settle with the poorhouse contractor." At this same meeting, the supervisors appointed W.B. Crandall as Steward of the Poor Farm at a

salary of \$800 per year.⁹ He was to begin work on January 22, 1874, the same day the young woman, her two sons and the Irish laborer would become the first residents.

The poorhouse, first conceived as a charitable establishment after the New England model, was tied to a productive farming operation in many Midwestern states, including Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa. Thus, the role of the steward, defined by Iowa Code in 1873, included management of the home, record keeping and finding work for the able-bodied. The presence of the farming operation required the steward to be a skilled farmer as well. Historian John Gillin includes this description of the role of the steward:

He has really become primarily the steward on the poor farm, and secondarily of the poorhouse. Most of the latter functions have been turned over to his wife as matron. He has become the farmer, rejoicing more in making the farm pay than in making the poorhouse a home of the aged and infirm; taking more pride in his fine cattle, hogs, or chickens, and in the spacious barns than in the comfort, usefulness, and happiness of the inmates of the poorhouse or in the buildings in which they are housed.¹⁰

The Webster County Board of Supervisors kept a close eye on the financial state of the poor farm, requiring a report from the steward at each quarterly meeting. In addition, one member of the board was appointed as a committee to oversee the farm's operations. In April 1874, four months after the poor farm began its operations, the cost to the taxpayers of Webster County was recorded in the supervisors' minutes as \$4,057. 56. In addition, the following costs of caring for the "insane" were reported:

Expenditures from Insane Fund:

| | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Mrs. M.E. Smith | sewing clothes for insane women | \$14.00 |
| John Evans | care of insane person | 6.00 |
| W.B. Dickinsen | care of insane person | 12.00 |
| W.H. Johnson | service as commissioner of insanity | 6.00 |
| T.F. Grayson | medical services (man) | 3.20 |
| M.G. Ristine | medical services (woman) | 10.50 |

Expenditures from Poor Fund:

Payment of farm, furnishing, supplies
J.C. Brown Commissioner services

\$4,057.56
30.55¹¹

The establishment of the Webster County Poor Farm provided one additional service to the poor and mentally ill residents of the county. The poor farm was an attempt to reduce the costs of providing relief to the poor and mentally ill within Webster County boundaries, but public relief was provided before 1874 in a number of ways.

The primary system of caring for the poor was through a system of outdoor relief. Outdoor relief for the poor took two forms. In one form, citizens of the county took in poor residents and received a stipend from the county treasury for their service. In the other form, payments to poor residents were made directly to the residents, after approval by the board of supervisors. Relief was granted after application to a township trustee, a member of the board of supervisors, or the Commissioner of the Poor, if one had been appointed.

Concern over care of the poor grew rapidly throughout the nation with the onset of the Civil War. Families of soldiers, widows and orphaned children were threatened with the humiliation of the poorhouse as their numbers swelled across the state. The State of Iowa enacted a tax to support the Soldiers' Relief Fund in 1861. Eventually, the state passed legislation preventing soldiers and their families from being sent to the poorhouse if they did not desire it.¹² Homes for orphans of soldiers, like those at Glenwood and Davenport, sprang up across the state to keep children from being placed in county poorhouses. Webster County was spared from the wartime controversy for lack of a poorhouse, but a few years later established its poor farm in the midst of continuing controversy over the role of poor farms in poor relief.

In 1873, the legislature extended the protection granted to the families of soldiers to all poor families in the state. Families could not be sent to poorhouses or farms if they did not wish to be. Instead, the county was forced to offer them outdoor relief. In 1878, this provision was extended to all Union soldiers, their widows and children.¹³ In addition to renewed interest in protecting poor families, the public became more concerned with the disposition of orphaned children following the war. In 1876, the Davenport Soldiers Orphan's Home opened its doors to other destitute children, and the counties in which they lived were charged for their support.

Other agencies began to be established to care for children of the poor, but no legislation protected them from the county poor farm. Children continued to be admitted to poor farms, especially with members of their families. Once admitted, the law allowed the board of supervisors or the Commissioner of the Poor to bind out children to apprenticeships. Boys could

be bound out until age 21, girls until age 18. In 1860, these ages were lowered to 18 for boys and 16 for girls. Children could also be bound out for shorter periods of time.

Public relief for indigent mentally ill residents took the form of admission into a state hospital or asylum. Care was provided at the county's expense. Iowa opened its first mental hospital at Mt. Pleasant in 1861, and a second hospital at Independence followed in 1873. Many mentally ill residents were also granted outdoor relief if a suitable care-taker could be located in the county. As hospital space became scarce and care became more expensive, chronically ill, but non-violent patients were sent to county poor farms or confined in county jails. The legislature approved a bill in 1873 that allowed trustees of state hospitals to send "insane" patients back to their resident counties if they were incurable. By 1875, 132 "insane" patients were residing in county poorhouses.¹⁴ This legislation prompted the construction of many county asylums across the state, and perhaps served as a factor in prompting the Webster County Supervisors to construct a poor farm in anticipation of future obligations.

Even after the construction of the poorhouse, the outdoor relief system was still in operation in Webster County. The supervisors appeared reluctant to approve its continued use, despite legislation protecting families from admission to the poorhouse against their will. At the board of supervisors meeting of April 1878, an appeal to the board by N. Murphy and his wife for poor relief, in the sum of \$1.50 per week until the June session of the supervisors, was defeated. In other action, the board rescinded poor relief of \$1.50 per week granted to Mrs. Samuelson in January. The supervisors also requested a report from the poor farm steward, showing the average cost of food, clothing and boarding for paupers on the poor farm.¹⁵ Although the system of outdoor relief to the poor continued after the construction of the poor farm, outdoor relief became harder to justify in economic terms. The poor farm proved to be a cheaper alternative for caring for the poor in most cases.

The poorhouse offered another option for the care of the mentally ill as well. It is clear from the minutes of the April 1874 Supervisors Meeting that outdoor relief for the mentally ill was also being utilized in the county. Two expenditures to county residents for the care of an insane person are listed under the "Insane Fund".¹⁶ In addition, care for the mentally ill was provided by state hospitals. In 1874, the county could send mentally ill patients to the new hospital at Independence (opened in 1873) or to the hospital at Mt. Pleasant, opened in 1861. The cost of the care of these patients was charged to the county where they resided. As costs rose, larger numbers of mentally ill residents were sent to the county poor farm. The poor farm again offered a cheaper alternative for caring for the mentally ill.

With the opening of its farm in 1874, Webster County joined fifty-two other Iowa counties with poor farms. Johnson and Lee Counties were the first to authorize money to establish poorhouses in the State in 1855. At the request of the Iowa General Assembly, a "visiting committee" reviewed the conditions of the poorhouses with particular interest in the care of the mentally ill and offered a report in 1875. The report found:

In 53 Counties with Poorhouses:

332 Male "paupers"
285 Female "paupers"
40 Male "idiots"
49 Female "idiots"
46 Male "insane"
43 Female "insane"

In 46 Counties without Poorhouses:

266 "paupers"
3 "idiots"
20 "insane"

....In one of our own counties, (Scott), a few years ago, an investigation into the conditions and discipline of the poorhouses, and particularly as to the relations between the ordinary male paupers and the insane females exhibited such shocking disclosures that the county authorities immediately established the rule that no cases of insanity should thenceforth be placed in their poorhouse.

...Pending completion of state accommodations for all the insane of Iowa, there should be at least, by provision, a statute enactment for constant general supervision by officials appointed by the state, of all the county institutions of detention, particularly including jails, poorhouses and public and private hospitals...¹⁷

This report was the first to call for centralized control over the care of the mentally ill in Iowa. The result was the establishment of the visiting committee on a permanent basis. The committee continued to review county institutions, but could only report their findings to the Governor. Public scrutiny of the county poor farms continued, but no formal action was taken until the end of the 19th century.

Webster County built its poorhouse in the midst of social questions about the proper care for poor individuals, families, widows and orphans of soldiers and the mentally ill. While economics may have driven its creation, there is ample evidence that it provided a vital service to the growing population of Webster County.

The First Building, 1874-1882

The Webster County Poor Farm would be home to the young woman, her boys and the Irish immigrant for the next two and one-half years. The fate of the “dog-killer” is unclear, though he was admitted and spent some time on the farm. It is likely that he was transferred to the state mental hospital for evaluation. Thirteen more residents arrived on the farm during its first year of operation, five during the month of October. The small frame structure became home to two young brothers, aged three years and one year (whose mentally ill father was being cared for by a private citizen at county expense; he was transferred to the poor farm from the State Hospital at Independence in 1896 and died there less than three years later on March 24, 1899); a fifteen-year old boy and his forty-seven year old mother; a thirty-seven year old male Norwegian immigrant; a ninety-six year old woman; two infants—a boy born on the farm and a girl three days old on her arrival (admitted without parents); a single young woman; a single young man; and a second young mother with two sons. The population on the farm totaled seventeen or eighteen at the end of 1874.

Name, age, place of birth, residence, occupation, date of admission, name of person ordering admission, and date of discharge or death are listed in the *Infirmity Register*. The physical, mental, emotional and social conditions of the residents are not recorded. Only on occasion are comments, penned by the steward or some other care-taker, included in the records. These comments provide some insights into the personal situations of the residents.

In the first year, fifteen of the residents admitted to the farm listed Fort Dodge as their home. One resident arrived from Yell Township, another from the village of West Dayton. All the residents (even the infants) were listed as “Laborers,” except for one Norwegian immigrant, whose occupation was “Moulder”. With the exception of two Irish immigrants and two Norwegian immigrants, the residents were natives to the United States. Nine of the first-year residents were under the age of eighteen; four between ages twenty and twenty-five, and only one over age sixty. No deaths occurred at the farm in its first year of operation, and none of the first seventeen residents left. The poor farm was clearly serving a need in Webster County, and contrary to public sentiment, children were a large percentage of the poor farm population in 1874.

Little evidence of the day-to-day life in the early years of the poor farm remains. Plans and photographs of the first building have not been located, but it must have been a modest structure, built for function and not for style. Life there, like most of rural Iowa, must have been a daily

routine of farm chores for the able-bodied men, kitchen and laundry for the able-bodied women, with help from the children according to their capabilities. In November 1874, the farm was home to eight children under the age of six years, four of the children without parents. It must have been a long winter.

The operation of the farm fell to the steward, J.B. Crandall. Hands were hired to help with farm work, and a matron, either the wife of Crandall or another employee, may have directed the housekeeping. It was common practice in other counties for the wife of the steward to assume the role of matron without formal appointment or promise of wage.

The population of the poor farm increased by nine in its second year. In contrast to 1874, the new residents were all over age thirty, except for one young mother of eighteen and her one year old son. Two of the new residents were over eighty years of age when they joined the farm population. Three of the nine new residents came from rural areas of Webster County, the rest from Fort Dodge. Immigrants also formed a larger percentage of the new resident population, with five of the nine born outside the United States. Again, no residents died or left the poor farm in 1875, bringing the population to a total of twenty-six by the end of its second year of operation.

The *Infirmary Register* is missing records for the years 1876 and 1877. The numerical sequence suggests that twenty-nine more residents were admitted during this two-year period. At least five residents left the farm in 1876. Their destinations are not recorded. The first to leave was a forty-eight year old woman who had lived on the farm for two years. A five year old boy, admitted two years earlier with a younger brother, left the farm in July 1876. His younger brother remained until June 1878, after four years on the poor farm. Three of the residents admitted in 1874 died in December 1876. The youngest son of the first woman admitted died on December 31, 1876, just four days after the young Norwegian immigrant woman and the baby boy, born on the farm in 1874, had died on the same day. These deaths suggest the onslaught of an infectious disease on the poor farm, but the records list no cause of death or place of burial. The farm had its own cemetery, where residents were buried in marked and unmarked graves. Were these the first residents to be buried on the farm? This question remains unanswered.

The death in 1877 of a sixty-nine year old Canadian man and the departure of ten more residents suggest that the population on the farm at the end of 1877 was around thirty residents. This estimate assumes that residents admitted during 1876 and 1877 followed patterns similar to the earliest residents, staying on the farm for about two years before discharge.

The first residents of the poor farm, the young mother with two sons and the immigrant laborer, left the farm during this two year period. The woman and her oldest son left on the same

day as the immigrant laborer: June 19, 1877. Her youngest son had died six months earlier on December 31, 1876. In the time that they spent in the poorhouse, the woman, Irish immigrant and her young son had shared their misfortune with twenty-four other poor residents from Webster County. The table below shows the numbers of residents admitted, released and remaining at the first poorhouse:

Admitted to the Poorhouse, 1874-1882

| Year | Admitted | Released | # on the farm |
|--------------|----------|----------|---------------|
| 1874 | 19 | 0 | 19 |
| 1875 | 9 | 0 | 28 |
| 1876 | | | ? |
| 1877 | 29* | 16* | 42 |
| 1878 | 25 | 25 | 42 |
| 1879 | 11 | 11 | 42 |
| 1880 | 17 | 4 | 55 |
| 1881 | 20 | 24 | 51 |
| 1882 | 26 | 21 | 13** |
| Total | 156 | 101 | |

* estimates based on remaining records

**according to the steward report to the supervisors

The pattern of residents moving through the poorhouse doors continued over the next several years. Twenty-five more residents moved into the poorhouse in 1878, and an equal number of residents left the farm. Young women with children, single young men, elderly couples and entire families relied upon the poor farm for short-term help in times of destitution. In 1878, a family of five, all native to England, spent less than one month on the poor farm. Others, like a nine-year-old boy from Fort Dodge, spent only one day on the farm. Short-term stays seemed to be a trend peculiar to 1878, when length of stays dropped to an average of only seventeen months (down from an average of thirty-two and forty-one in its first two years of operation), and fifteen of the residents admitted stayed less than six months.

In November 1878, a fifty-four year old resident (gender is not listed) was admitted to the poorhouse. Unlike many other residents who used the poorhouse as a short-term home while looking for better opportunities, this resident remained on the farm until he/she died on October 10, 1904, almost twenty-six years later. This was the first of many residents for whom the poorhouse provided more than temporary assistance; instead it became their final home.

Committing or admitting residents to the poor farm was the duty of the board of

supervisors. It continued to authorize and refuse requests from residents seeking outdoor relief, and the supervisors also dealt with poor residents who sought relief from other counties. This action appears in the Minutes of the Board from Friday, April 12, 1878:

Proceedings...

-review report from clerk of Butler Township, Scott County..."regarding one (name edited), a pauper alleged to be from Webster Co."

-report given to special committee (Mr. Cox) to examine validity and report.¹⁸

The population served by the farm continued to be a mix of foreign-born and American-born residents. Occupations are listed almost universally as "Laborer" in the *Register* until February 1879. In the column under residence next to a forty-nine year old male, "Tramp" is listed, and under occupation, "Tramping". This man left in September 1879, his destination unknown.¹⁹

Public sentiment regarding the poor and indigent is reflected in a newspaper column reprinted in the *Webster County Gazette* on October 25, 1878. Entitled "The Pauper Tribe," it gives us some insight into the sentiment of the time period:

The Pauper Tribe

The difference between poverty and pauperism, though wide as the world, is too often overlooked. The best of men may become poor; may honorably reach the point of actual destitution, indeed, it has not infrequently happened that the world's best benefactors have experienced extreme poverty pursuing the course which has ultimately brought them to the highest financial and industrial as well as moral success. No combination of circumstances, however, no matter how disastrous could make such men paupers. The pauper is made of very different material; he is what he is too often by preference, very often by inheritance.

Last year Dr. Hoyt, Secretary of the the New York Board of Charities, visited sixty-four poorhouses, containing 13,000 public paupers. Less than one-fourth were of American parentage. In fifty-five cases investigated the pauperism extended to the second generation on the fathers side and in ninety-two cases to the third generation on the mothers side. Three hundred and ninety-seven had pauper fathers; one thousand three hundred and sixty-one had pauper mothers ; and so on. Their pauperism was hereditary. The close relation of criminality with inherited pauperism—the more forceful members of each family preferring to seize what they want rather than beg for it—is shown in the well known "Jukes" family, which, in one hundred and fifty years, furnished this State with eight hundred and thirty criminals of baser types, besides many imbeciles, lunatics and other undesirable characters.

Professor Brewer, who has given much study to the pauper and tramp problem, is confident that wherever the genesis of paupers is thus looked into there will be found abundant evidence of a pauper tribe well established among us, and perpetuating its instincts in its descendants. For this class no mawkish sentimentality will answer; they need strict justice. The class as a class must be rooted out by resolute treatment. The chain of criminal entailment must somehow be broken in them or they will breed a moral pestilence. Against such outlaws, "for whom," as a contemporary has said, "childhood has no sanctity, hospitality no safeguard, and property no rights," only vigorous measures will suffice. There is enough of honest poverty, through flood and fire and sickness, to furnish occupation to the charitable, without the burden of voluntary pauperism, the effect of which is too often to steel the hearts of the sympathetic against all poverty and distress. The honest seeker for employment is confounded with the professional tramps, of whom the most charitable of communities is becoming heartily sick. In justice to the deserving poor—and there is always a large class which, through no fault of their own, may become poor—the pauper tribe should at least receive no encouragement.

For many years in this country the single fact that a person was in need of food or clothing or shelter was held to be a valid reason for giving what was asked. The country became in consequence a perfect paradise for the pauper tribe. They fared so well that multitudes brought by adverse circumstances to poverty were tempted over the line into pauperism. And many others lingered on the verge, passing their time between unwilling labor, pauperism, and petty criminality. Out of these has grown a class of criminal vagrants now by far the worst disturbers of the public peace and the public moral health. Indeed, the Indian problem, bad as it is, is a trifle compared with that arising from the existence of the pauper tribe. The Indian is on the frontier; the vicious tramp is everywhere. And it is safe to say that year by year, the life and property destroyed by the tramp tribe exceeds that due to Indian depredations. If we are justified in spending millions in Indian wars; in placing upon reservations and trying to civilize the one class of savages, much more justifiable must be the taking of measures, national in scope and magnitude to control and reclaim if possible the other. Nothing short of this, we fear, will ever rid us of the pest.—*Scientific American*.²⁰

The poor farm, already in the midst of social controversy over the care of children, families and the mentally ill, was also providing services to a class of citizens for which society seemed to have great scorn and fear. How one moved from "honest poverty" to "pauper" is not clear, but the term "pauper" was used generally to describe all residents of the poorhouse. Perhaps the use of the term "tramp" in the *Infirmity Register* was one method the staff used to separate the

honorable poor from the dishonorable pauper. References to "bums, tramps and drifters" became more frequent following this initial listing in the poorhouse records.

The Webster County Poorhouse provided shelter for a number of residents who seemed to wander in and out of its doors for most of their lives. In February 1881, one such man was first admitted to the poorhouse at the age of sixteen. His connection with the institution continued until his death at the age of sixty-five. He wandered in and out of three different buildings and three different eras of poor relief in the forty-nine years of his association with the poor farm. Staff comments simply state, "He calls this place home."²¹

African-Americans made up a small fraction of the general population in Webster County, and only rarely appeared as residents of the poor farm. The only African-American resident of the first poorhouse was admitted on March 17, 1881. The twenty year old laborer from Tennessee listed his residence as Fort Dodge. He died less than a month later on April 9, 1881. The cause of his death is not recorded, nor is the site of his burial.

At the end of 1881, the county approved the purchase of 120 acres of additional land for the county poor farm. Two years later, the supervisors approved the construction of a new county poorhouse, a large frame structure that could house up to thirty-two residents. The original farm served an average of thirty-six residents per year, ranging from the original nineteen in 1874 to a peak of forty-five in its last year. These numbers suggest that the original building may have been quite cramped, especially during the winter months, but the figures do not show how many people were present in the house at the same time. In view of the fact that the residents moved in and out of the structure, the numbers must have been somewhat stable, but as the steward's report suggests at least fifteen, and perhaps as many as twenty, were all in the structure at one time.

This report of the steward for the year 1882 marks the end of the first era in the history of the poorhouse in Webster County:

**Report of the Steward of the poor farm
Fort Dodge, Iowa, Jan. 1, 1883**

To the Honorable Board of Supervisors of Webster County, Iowa:

Gentlemen:—I have the honor to submit the following report of the business transactions on the poor farm for the year ending January 1, 1883:

| | |
|---|----|
| Number of inmates January 1, 1882..... | 13 |
| No. of male inmates admitted during year..... | 23 |
| No. of female inmates admitted during year..... | 2 |
| No. of children born during year (male)..... | 1 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| No. of inmates discharged..... | 24 |
| No. inmates died..... | 2 |
| No. inmates January 1, 1883..... | 15 |

There has been expended during year \$1,691.53, as follows:

| | |
|---|---------|
| Chas Bank, dry goods..... | \$ 3.05 |
| Craig Coal Company, coal..... | 18.37 |
| Linda Grosshart, labor..... | 27.00 |
| RW Crawford, goods..... | 20.68 |
| JB Scott, boots and shoes..... | 2.30 |
| Jno Keith, threshing..... | 18.27 |
| Jno Wolfinger & Co, groceries..... | 41.85 |
| SW Chapler, brick..... | 4.00 |
| BD Beach, mason work..... | 7.00 |
| WH Johnson, molasses..... | 18.00 |
| EE Prusia, hardware..... | 8.35 |
| Thos Hines, hay..... | 3.60 |
| Jno Kline, repairing boots and shoes..... | 10.30 |
| Chris Halligan, blacksmithing..... | 20.95 |
| GM Hull and Sons, dry goods..... | 132.79 |
| Walter Irvine, coal..... | 75.19 |
| JW Brownwell, plow and pump..... | 35.30 |
| Wright & Robertson, hardware..... | 60.94 |
| DM Crosby, boots and shoes..... | 32.60 |
| DK Lincoln, groceries..... | 445.30 |
| Cheney & Oleson, medicine..... | 41.49 |
| AH Johnson, barrels..... | 6.50 |
| C Selden, butter and potatoes..... | 73.68 |
| Moe & Larson, groceries..... | 52.35 |
| M. Doherty, hay and use of planter..... | 7.80 |
| Ben Jones, meat..... | 14.55 |
| WB Crandall, sundries..... | 152.55 |
| Lumpkin, Moore & Co., lumber..... | 18.50 |
| RP Furling, clothing, etc..... | 107.44 |
| SJ Bennett, tobacco..... | 57.48 |
| Chas Reckard, labor..... | 170.00 |

Stock:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| Whole number of cattle on hand..... | 37 |
| Stock hogs..... | 29 |
| Fat hogs..... | 12 |
| Cattle sold..... | 5 |
| Cattle died..... | 2 |
| Cattle butchered..... | 1 |
| Pork slaughtered, 4,300 pounds. | |

Grain raised during year:

Corn.....1200 bushels
Oats.....609 bushels
Potatoes.....300 bushels
Hay put in stack, 90 tons.

Money received for produce, etc. as follows:

Cash received from Hull for hogs.....\$ 42.12
Cash received from Butler for taking up one bull.....1.00
Cash received for keeping machine men.....1.00
Cash received from M Savage for bull.....50.00
Cash received from Hull for four steers.....157.75
Lard sold DK Lincoln and credited on his bill dated
Dec. 29, 1882, 176 pounds.....22.88

Grain received from county farm on section 4,88,29 as follows:

Wheat.....17-1/4 bushels
Oats.....149 bushels
Corn.....275 bushels

All of which is respectfully submitted.

W.B. Crandall, Steward.²²

The annual report for the farm gives us clues as to the diet and lifestyle of the residents. Coal-burning stoves provided heat and cooking facilities. Resident diets included butter, potatoes, pork and a little beef. The garden produce and foodstuff included in the grocery bill are not listed here, but were certainly part of the diet. Residents had shoes and boots and were provided with clothing and even tobacco. The expenditure on medicine - \$41.49 - suggests some medical care was available to the residents.

The poor farm account was only a portion of the county budget spent on poor relief. In the same year, the county auditor reports expenditures of \$3,877.28 for "Poor outside of Poorhouse." In addition, \$1,410.66 was spent on the care of the "Deaf, dumb and insane."²³ Of the \$33,551 total budget for Webster County in 1882, over 20 percent, or about \$6,798, was devoted to the care of the poor and mentally ill. Public concern over these expenditures might account for the detailed final reports published with the minutes of the board of supervisors. The list details all poor fund expenditures, duplicating some of those listed on the poor farm account, but also including expenditures for outdoor relief. Eight Webster County residents provided board for paupers in 1882, receiving \$258.00 for their services. Other expenses included building coffins for paupers. M. Young and C. Laufersweiler provided this service, charging the county \$80.50 for their

services. Meat, medical services, shoes, general goods and transportation were all provided for poor residents at county expense in 1882.²⁴

The board of supervisors continued to wrestle with the individual requests for poor relief. In January 1882, they allotted a family "\$2.00 per week out of poor fund until the April session." In addition, they appointed W.H. Johnson as Commissioner of the Insane.²⁵

The tale of another type of poorhouse resident also begins with the supervisors' minutes in 1882. At the September meeting, a report from the auditor of Cherokee County states that a young woman is "adjudged to be insane and a resident of Webster County."²⁶ This young woman was later admitted to the state hospital in Independence (1898-1891), sent to the Webster County Poorhouse in December 1891, transferred to Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane in 1903 and then returned once again to the county poor farm in 1917. In 1928, after over 30 years of institutional care both at the state hospital and the county poor farm, she was transferred once again to the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane. Her final fate is not recorded.

The records of the years between 1874 and 1882 list only one reference to a mentally ill resident on the poor farm, but the need for care of county residents with mental illnesses would soon fall onto the shoulders of the staff of the poor farm. Webster County made a radical change in the way it provided for its unfortunate citizens with the construction of the first poorhouse in 1874. Now the county entered an era of greater public controversy, official scrutiny, pressing needs for the care of the mentally ill and the rise of professional welfare agents in a new larger building.



The Second Building, 1883-1917

The second building erected to provide care for the poor and mentally ill in Webster County was a frame structure which reported to have a capacity of thirty-two people.²⁷ In a faded newspaper photograph printed in 1963, a group of twenty men and women are gathered in front of a simple, two-story, gable, frame house with two, two-story ells attached. Two small porches with simple rounded posts can also be seen. A white picket fence with alternating picket heights surrounds the front yard of the home. The faces of the residents are too faint to be seen clearly. Most residents appear to be elderly, stooped over and leaning on others, crutches, canes or the backs of chairs. Two young men in the foreground stand with their hats in their hands; their role here is unclear.²⁸

The remaining records do not indicate when the new building was actually occupied, but the increase in the size of the building suggests that the county supervisors anticipated an increased demand on the county's resources for the care of the poor and mentally ill. Indeed,

thirty-eight residents were admitted during the first year of operation in the new building. Ironically, a young mother of twenty-five and her two children, a girl aged four years and a boy aged three years, were probably among the first to utilize the new facility, being admitted on January 13, 1883. The young mother gave birth to a second daughter eighteen days later. This young family did not leave the farm together. The infant was discharged just three months later, her destination unlisted, and the young boy left one month later. Finally, near the end of the year, the young woman left with her oldest daughter; their destination was not documented.

The year 1883 proved to be dominated by the care of young women and children on the poor farm. A young English woman from Otho township entered the poorhouse with her two-year-old son on March 28, 1883 and gave birth to a child (gender and name unlisted) on May 1. The infant left the farm twenty-one days later (destination undocumented); the woman and her young son left for parts unknown on July 27 of that year.

This pattern continued throughout the rest of 1883. In September, a young woman from Fort Dodge arrived at the poorhouse with her four year old son. She gave birth to a second son on March 10, 1884. These three left the poorhouse together on May 12th of that year, but for many young women with children keeping the family together was not possible. On November 3, 1883, a thirty-three year old woman from Fort Dodge entered the poorhouse with five children under the age of nine. She gave birth to a sixth on March 29, 1884. He was adopted one month later by a couple from Sioux Rapids, Iowa. The seven year old girl left for an unrecorded destination just seven days after their arrival. Three of her siblings, a five year old sister, three year old brother and two year old sister left on November 17, 1883, to an unknown destination. The last two members of this family finally left the farm in June 1884. The nine year old boy was discharged alone, and eight days later his mother left. It is clear from the records that the infant was adopted and taken out of the county, but the fate of the other children is unclear. Perhaps relatives cared for them; perhaps they, too, were adopted, or perhaps they were sent to a home for orphans in Davenport or Glenwood. The oldest son may have been bound out to work for his room and board.

For the three year old boy, November 1883 marked the beginning of a relationship with the poorhouse that would last until age fifteen. It is unclear where the young boy went when discharged on November 17 with his two sisters, but he returned to the poorhouse in December 1886 at the age of seven. Later that month, he was bound out for employment to a couple in Clay township. At age fifteen, he returned to the poorhouse, staying for three months until he

went to work for a man in Clark, Iowa.²⁹

Two children, a boy and a girl were born on the farm in 1883. The girl was adopted by a family in Woodbury County in June 1885, at the age of one year. The boy, whose fate is unclear, but he left the farm two months after his mother and two year old sister were released. The infant girl's mother, admitted at the age of twenty-two, died on the farm in January 1919 after spending more than thirty-five years as a resident. She was buried in the farm cemetery.

Children were also occasionally admitted to the poorhouse without parents in 1883. On the same day in February, four siblings from Fort Dodge, ranging in age from six to twelve years, were admitted and then discharged from the poorhouse. The records make no comment as to the circumstances that led to their brief visit.

In all, fifteen children aged ten years and younger were admitted to the poorhouse in 1883. Three more were born on the farm. Also in 1884, three children were born to mothers who had been admitted in 1883. Of the fifteen, six left the farm with their mothers. The four siblings admitted without a parent left without a parent. Only one of the six babies born in 1883 and 1884 left the farm with his/her mother. Two of the infants were adopted, according to the records. The fate of the other three is not clear, but it seems likely that they too were adopted.

During the turbulent years of 1883 and 1884, the population mix of the poorhouse included young women (with and without children), "tramps", single men and women in their thirties and forties and a few elderly residents. One man, a sixty-four year old Irish laborer, drifted in and out of the county poorhouse from 1884 until he was transferred to the Soldiers Home at Marshalltown in April 1888.

The population of the poorhouse also provides clues to the changing nature of Webster County. The reference to "tramp" and "bum" as an occupation (or perhaps a character assessment) grows steadily after its first appearance in 1882. The number of transients making their way through Webster County increased as railroad traffic became more frequent. The strain on the poor fund was noted by the county supervisors in the minutes of their January 1883 meeting:

Proceedings of the board of supervisors
-State of the Poor fund
....heavy depreciation of poor fund due to influx of poor
and paupers because of building of RR. Also depleted
because of small-pox cases in county.'

S.J. BENNETT
Samuel Heffner
Committee³⁰

The supervisors recognized that both disease and the coming of the railroad had impacted the county poor funds in 1883. The records of the poor farm make no mention of smallpox in the county, which suggests that the outdoor relief may have been the preferred method of caring for the poor and infected. The first association between the railroad and "tramps" is made in the *Infirmity Register* in 1885. A twenty-seven year old man, admitted in June 1885, is listed in the records as both "tramp" and "RR Man". After less than one month on the farm, he was "disgracefully discharged to the county jail for bad conduct."³¹

While many of the residents of the poorhouse may have been suffering from physical or mental handicaps which hampered their ability to find meaningful long-term employment, it wasn't until the end of 1885 that the term "insane" was used to describe residents in the *Infirmity Register*. The first such entry lists the residence of a sixty-five year old man, admitted on December 29, 1885, as "Lunatic Asylum." It is possible that this resident was the first to be transferred from a state hospital (the state hospital at Independence was referred to as the "Insane Asylum at Independence") to the county poorhouse in order to save money. The order for admission was given by John Haine, County Auditor. No record of the release of this resident was located.³²

Other mentally ill residents followed in 1886. The first, a sixty-four year old man, was admitted in February 1886 and transferred "to the Insane Hospital by the County Clerk" eight months later. The second man, a forty year old Swedish immigrant, was transferred in March to the poorhouse from the "Lunatic Asylum at Independence," and returned home in March 1887.³³

Two women, both transferred from the hospital at Independence, arrived on the farm on April 6, 1886. They lived together for over eighteen years at the poorhouse. Both died on the farm in September 1904, just five days apart. Records indicate that one woman was buried in the farm cemetery. Later in April, a sixty-one year old "bummer" was admitted to the farm. The record notes that he was transferred to the hospital at Independence in 1889, and that he later died there.

July 1886 brought three more mentally ill residents to the poor farm. One, a twenty-six year old Swedish immigrant, stayed only three days before leaving; his destination was unknown. The second, a woman whose age was unknown, arrived on July 24, 1886. She died on the farm nine years later on April 24, 1895.

A Swedish immigrant from Gowrie township was admitted in October 1886. His occupation was listed as "insane." He left the farm in March of the following year and the record

states simply that, "He ran away."³⁴

In addition to now serving an increasing number of mentally ill residents, the poorhouse continued to provide short-term shelter to women and their children. In September 1886, a Norwegian immigrant and her four children, all under the age of eight years, were admitted to the farm. They left together less than a week later, their destination unknown. Two young sisters entered the poorhouse on January 21, 1887. One of them gave birth to a son on February 10 of that year. The child died on April 2, and the two sisters left the farm together nine days later, their destination unrecorded.

Most of the adults admitted to the poorhouse with children were women, but occasionally a single man with a child found his way to the poor farm. In August 1888, a sixty-one year old English immigrant was admitted with his fifteen year old son. The father died the next day and the son left the farm three days later, his destination unknown.

The poorhouse continued to be the final home for some elderly Webster County residents. In July 1888, a sixty-one year old man was admitted to the poor farm. He spent the last twenty years of his life there and was buried in the poor farm cemetery.

There is little evidence that Webster County residents were concerned with the daily lives of the residents of the poor farm. Except for the minutes of the county supervisors which include financial reports of the poor farm and votes for admittance of residents, few reports concerning the poor farm have been found. However, an event in 1888 not only prompted a story in the local paper, but was also important enough for one Webster County citizen to cut out and paste in a "Scrapbook of News from Feb. 23, 1888 to April 13, 1888." This story was pasted under the date Wednesday, March 28, 1888:

A Pauper, whose name could not be learned died very suddenly on the poor farm yesterday. He was milking a cow when without a moments warning he fell over dead. A coroner's inquest may be held. ³⁵

The records indicate that a poor German immigrant, who had entered the poorhouse in January 1880 at the age of sixty, died on March 27, 1888. He had wandered in and out of the poorhouse several times in the eight years since his initial admission, yet there is nothing in the record to indicate the cause of his death or to suggest that it may have been surrounded by unusual circumstances. It is not clear from the remaining newspapers whether an inquest was held to identify the cause of death.

Records of the years for 1889 and 1890 indicate that only six new residents were admitted

to the poor farm. Of these, only two stayed longer than three months, and several stayed less than one month. The farm continued to serve as temporary shelter to a group of homeless men who wandered through its doors. One man, first admitted in July 1885, entered and exited the poorhouse eight times between 1885 and the end of 1890. He died on the poor farm nineteen years later at the age of eighty-four. Another man, an Irish immigrant, went through the doors seven times between 1885 and 1890. He died on the poor farm in February 1892.

While the number of poor residents utilizing the poor farm decreased between 1889 and 1890, the population boomed upward again in 1891. The residents continued to be a mix of single poor men, the elderly and young women with children. A young English woman gave birth to a boy six days after she was admitted. Two months later the child was sent to the orphans home in Davenport, and his mother left for parts unknown. An infant boy, born on the farm in April, was discharged with his twenty year old Swedish mother (assumed from the records since the surname is different for the child) less than a month later. A homeless Norwegian immigrant, admitted in June 1891, left the farm in February 1892 for Omaha, Nebraska. The record notes "for bad conduct shipped to Omaha, Neb."³⁶

By November 1891, the poor farm had seen only fourteen new residents. To the steward and his staff, it must have seemed like a routine year, busier than the past two, but not as hectic as 1883, when thirty-eight new residents were admitted to the farm. The board of supervisors radically changed all of that by approving the transfer of six mentally ill patients from the hospital at Independence to the poor farm on December 19, 1891. All of the patients were women; most of their ages are unrecorded. Of the six, three were eventually returned to the state mental hospital. One thirty-four year old was returned to Independence seven years later in June 1898. She was then transferred to the new state mental hospital at Cherokee after it opened in 1903. She returned to the Webster County Poor Farm again in May 1917 in another larger transfer of patients between the two institutions. After thirty-six years of living between state and county institutions, she was transferred back to Cherokee at the age of seventy years.

Bouncing between the poor farm and the state mental hospital was a fate shared by many mentally ill residents that followed. Two women were sent to the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane. One left the farm in January 1903 and died at Cherokee in May 1930 after spending over thirty-nine years of her life in these institutions. After her death in 1930, the records note that \$1,104 was recovered from her estate to help defray the fees of \$3,963, which were charged to the county during her stay at Cherokee.³⁷ A third woman, a widow, left the farm for Cherokee in May 1904. She returned to the poor farm in June 1919 and died on the farm three years later.

Two of the mentally ill women transferred from Independence on December 19, left the poor farm for a home in Dayton, Iowa, in January of the next year. It is not clear from the records what the relationship between the two women and the home in Dayton may have been. Perhaps their families had arranged for private nursing home care. For the sixth woman, the poor farm would become her last home. She died on the farm ten years later and was buried in the farm cemetery.

This large scale transfer of patients from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane to the poor farm was the beginning of a trend that would continue throughout the history of the Webster County Poor Farm. As hospital care became more costly and space more valuable, the poor farm provided alternative care for some mentally ill patients. Certainly for the staff on the poor farm, dealing with six new mentally ill residents all on the same day must have been emotionally and physically draining. The rest of December 1891 would prove to be just as challenging. Six more residents arrived before the end of 1891. One group of five, a woman with four children under the age of nine, stayed on the farm for about six weeks until they moved as a group to Sioux County. In all, twelve of the twenty-six residents admitted in 1891 came to the poor farm in December of that year. The combination of young children and recently transferred mentally ill patients must have proved a great challenge for the staff and other residents of the poor farm.

By contrast, 1892 was a quiet year on the poor farm. Only six new residents were admitted, all male. Most stayed less than six months. For one German immigrant admitted in December 1892, the poor farm would be his last home. He died and was buried there two years later. Above the usual notations in the *Infirmary Register*, the cause of his death is written in faint red ink:

HE COMMITTED SUICIDE OCT. 24, 1894.³⁸

This is the one of two deaths attributed to suicide on the poor farm records examined between 1874 and 1950.

If 1892 was a quiet year, 1893 proved again to be a challenge. In January, three young siblings were admitted to the poor farm without parents. One month later, their eighty year old grandmother was admitted suffering from mental illness. In March, the grandmother was transferred to the state hospital in Independence. Her grandchildren remained on the farm until May 1893, when their mother arrived to take them to Lehigh, Iowa. A fifty-one year old German immigrant, admitted in poor health in October, died fifteen days later. He was initially buried on the poor farm cemetery, but the record notes that he was "removed to German Lutheran Symetery (sic) by request of his wife."³⁹

In September, six more mentally ill patients were transferred from the hospital at Independence to the poor farm. This group consisted of all male patients. One left just six days after his arrival apparently heading for his home in the county, but was returned by the sheriff in October. He continued to go in and out of the poor farm until his death on the farm in 1904. Three of the men were taken from the farm to private home care within days of the September transfer. One returned later and died on the farm in 1899. The last two men remained indefinitely; records indicate they were residents in 1917, but beyond that year nothing tells what became of them.

The characteristics of residents continued in similar patterns in the years between 1893 and the turn of the century. Men, women and children suffering from a variety of misfortunes arrived, stayed and moved through the doors of the poor farm. The amount of time residents remained continued to shrink as most poor residents remained for less than six months. For the mentally ill, the poor farm continued to provide economical long-term care as an alternative to the state hospitals. For some county residents, the connection to the poor farm extended across generations. A seventy-five year old man admitted in July 1895 died on the poor farm three months later and was buried in the farm cemetery. Fifty-seven years later his son went to live at the Webster County Home at the age of seventy-five. He died at the home nine years later in 1959; his place of burial is unknown.

The population of the poor farm continued to be a mix of ethnic diversity, with the largest immigrant populations from Ireland, Sweden, Norway and Germany. Occasionally, the poor farm would become home to people from ethnic groups whose presence in the county was a small minority. A young Arabian woman admitted with her one-year-old son in November 1895 serves as such an example. Her occupation is listed as "peddler", but the record does not indicate when she or her son left the farm or where they headed.

African-Americans were also a small fraction of the population served by the poor farm. The only two African-American residents of the second building were a young woman admitted in May 1896 for a one-month stay, and a thirty-eight year old man who died six days after being admitted in April 1897 and was buried on the farm.

Mentally ill residents continued to trickle into the poor farm population as transfers from the state hospital at Independence and as residents sent by the supervisors. Another large block of nine patients was transferred from Independence to the poor farm in 1896. Of those, five died on the farm, two returned to the hospital at Independence and one left to find employment. The ninth man stayed on the farm until 1912 at which point the record states he "wandered away from

farm and not found.”

The following table lists the numbers of residents admitted and released from the second poor farm after its erection until the turn of the century.

Numbers Admitted to poor farm, 1883-1899*

| Year | Admitted | Released |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1883 | 38 | 27 |
| 1884 | 16 | 18 |
| 1885 | 15 | 18 |
| 1886 | 21 | 18 |
| 1887 | 14 | 12 |
| 1888 | 9 | 12 |
| 1889 | 4 | 4 |
| 1890 | 3 | 7 |
| 1891 | 25 | 6 |
| 1892 | 6 | 17 |
| 1893 | 30 | 25 |
| 1894 | 16 | 18 |
| 1895 | 8 | 5 |
| 1896 | 22 | 11 |
| 1897 | 21 | 18 |
| 1898 | 9 | 9 |
| 1899 | 12 | 11 |
| Total | 269 | 236 |

As the population of the Webster County Poor Farm continued to diversify, the demands for better control and supervision of the mentally ill grew. After the report of the Visiting Committee in 1875, recommendations to appoint a State Board of Control to regularly inspect county facilities which housed mentally ill patients were made to Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter. Instead, Carpenter urged that the powers of the Visiting Committee be enlarged to include the examination of county jails and poorhouses and suggested improving the conditions found there. These recommendations were largely ignored. Although the Visiting Committee continued to report its findings to the governor, the annual report prompted little change in the management of the county facilities. The idea of establishing a State Board of Control surfaced again in 1882 when Governor John H. Gear suggested that such a board was necessary to supervise the management of poorhouses across the state. Twelve years later the debate resurfaced. It centered around the same issues -- to enlarge the powers of the Visiting Committee or establish a State Board of Control. Finally, in 1898 the legislature passed a bill that established a State Board of Control for all state charitable and correctional institutions. In 1900 the inspection process was

extended to all county poorhouses where the insane were kept.⁴⁰

A review of the state, county and private institutions caring for the insane was undertaken almost immediately by the Board of Control and issued as a *Bulletin of Iowa Institutions*. Published in 1900, "The Care of the Insane in Iowa" was written by Forest C. Ensign, a master's student at the University of Iowa. Ensign visited and critiqued the conditions he found at the variety of institutions around the state. While he did not visit Webster County, it is useful to look at the comparable county institutions that are described. Ensign described the existing hospitals for the mentally ill in Iowa - Mt. Pleasant, Independence, Clarinda, and Cherokee (under construction). These institutions housing 2,759 persons were providing the best treatment and care in the state, according to Ensign. He had little praise for the private institutions he visited - Mercy Hospital for the Insane in Davenport, St. Joseph's Mercy Insane Asylum in Dubuque and Josephite Sanitarium in Iowa City. While the quality of the facilities and food were high in these institutions, there was little treatment - which was seen primarily as work - available for the 450 persons in these institutions.⁴¹

After visiting twenty county poorhouses, Ensign chose twelve to describe in his report. There were 1,147 mentally ill housed in county poorhouses across the state, according to Ensign. The conditions varied widely. Overall, he found the treatment of the mentally ill in poorhouses ranged from deplorable to adequate, but was far below the quality of the state mental hospitals. The most deplorable treatment of the mentally ill was found in Louisa County. The building itself, a two-story frame structure, was built about thirty years earlier and in "wretched" condition. Twenty-six "insane" and "paupers" who lived in the house were not separated, making it difficult for the staff to determine who was mentally ill. The house contained no running water and was heated with wood stoves. Two small buildings with barred windows were behind the main structure. Here the poor and mentally ill shared "cells about six feet by seven. The front of each cell is made of 2 by 4 scantlings, placed one inch apart. The door is solid and provided with a strong lock, while an opening about 6 by 10 inches offers means of pushing in food without opening the door." It was noted that all the residents were locked in their rooms at night, and that some were locked in during the day as a means of restraint.⁴²

Other means of restraining mentally ill patients were described by Ensign in reference to a facility in Muscatine County, where special rooms were kept for some of the "insane" patients:

In the boiler house are rooms for the very filthy and violent class.
A basement room about fourteen feet square is used for four men.
Two of these are kept chained to the wall during the day; a chain is fastened around the leg about the ankle, passed through the wall,

and secured on the other side.....Occasionally these men are led out on the hillside and chained to trees. Holes they have dug in the ground with their naked hands and feet bear witness to their activity. At night four strong wooden crates or cribs, just large enough to contain a man's recumbent body, are brought into the room, the men are made to get in and lie down, the lid is securely locked, and there they remain until morning. Then, at the pleasure of the keeper, they are taken out and bathed, the rags on which they lay are burned, the cribs are washed and left out in the air till needed again.....Above, in the same building are kept three filthy female patients. They have a day room and a sleeping room, are not chained, but sleep in cribs at night. They keep themselves nearly naked, and are utterly filthy....no attempt is made to bring the inmates of this building to table. They eat like wild beasts from pans containing their food.⁴³

Aside from the treatment of these mentally ill persons, Ensign found the facility to be above average. Two of the county poorhouses visited and described by Ensign were about the same size as the Webster County building constructed in 1883. The living conditions described at the facilities in Benton and Buchanan Counties were probably quite close to those in Webster County. Each contained twenty-eight and twenty-nine "inmates" respectively, sixteen and eleven of which were "insane". The buildings, while not state-of-the-art, were frame farm houses with additions added over time. The conditions in these two poorhouses were adequate. The food was good and plentiful; residents were relatively clean and well-clothed, and women were separated from men as much as possible. The mentally ill were not restrained or confined, except at night. In Buchanan County Ensign notes, "The insane kept here are usually mild and harmless, though occasionally one has to be locked in a room by himself or if quite violent, handcuffed. In case an inmate develops into a dangerous maniac, he is taken back to the state hospital at Independence only three miles away." Ensign's largest complaint was the mixing of the poor and "insane" and the lack of meaningful work and activity for the residents.⁴⁴

Ensign's report signals the changing attitudes about how to best treat and care for the mentally ill. In his conclusions, Ensign applauds the "modern and scientific" state hospitals. The farm surrounding each hospital provided the avenue for the best therapy for the mentally ill—work, exercise and recreation. Men and women were working on the farm, playing games and walking the grounds on a daily basis. Ensign believed that by using these methods, some mental illness could be reversed if treatment occurred quickly. Once the disease reached the chronic stage, the patient was considered incurable. Ensign recommended such patients be sent to county poorhouses to open up space in the state hospital for those patients who had

some hope for recovery.



Ensign called for creating higher more consistent standards across the state for the care of the mentally ill in county poorhouses. He suggested that the public be more interested and informed as to the living conditions of the unfortunate. He also felt that the county facilities were understaffed and undertrained for dealing with the mentally ill.

The steward, for example, is at the very best only an intelligent farmer, usually knowing nothing whatever about the care of the insane, too often regarding them as a sort of criminal class to be scolded or frightened, or if need be, beaten into obedience. Very often the steward gains his place as a reward for political services rendered, and holds it because he is a convenient tool for some local politician to use on occasion. Again, in a number of counties, the position is secured by means of bids, the salary falling as low as \$450 per year for the steward and his wife.⁴⁵

In addition, the county poorhouses needed better buildings, including facilities for bathing, exercising, instruction in daily manners and habits of cleanliness. The poorhouse should accept and keep only "harmless" mentally ill patients, as the state law dictated, and return violent inmates to the state hospitals. Finally, Ensign strikes out against the use of economy to justify county care:

The expense of maintaining an insane person in one of our state hospitals is about twelve dollars per month. It is impossible to obtain exact statistics from the counties, but an estimate of from six to eight dollars is usually given... Can the value of human minds, personal

decency, and self respect be measured in dollars and cents?⁴⁶

As the Webster County Poor Farm entered a new century, it faced an increasing level of scrutiny both from state officials and the public. The general population of the entire country became more interested in the reform of welfare programs, protection for unwed and abandoned women with children and the care of the insane. This article appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, February 27, 1893:

FORT DODGE, IOWA, February 26. Mrs. William Wilbur of Rowan has been adjudged insane and sent to the insane asylum. The incident causing her to lose her mind was a graphic pen picture of hell drawn in the pulpit by her pastor.⁴⁷

Mrs. Wilbur never became a resident of the Webster County Poor Farm. However, public interest in the physical and mental conditions which led to reactions like the one demonstrated by Mrs. Wilbur along with state interest in the conditions under which such people received care slowly ushered in a new era at the Webster County Poor Farm.

It is difficult to see the results of increased public and official scrutiny in the first five years following Ensign's report. Certainly, the State Board of Control began to visit the institution regularly at least once per year, but the results of those visits are not recorded in the poor farm records.

The circumstances of the residents being admitted to the Webster County Poor Farm changed some as women with children and children without parents were virtually eliminated from the farm population after 1900. The mix of young and old, men and women, single and married residents remained fairly consistent from 1900-1905, but numbers decreased drastically. Only thirty-seven new residents were admitted to the poor farm in these five years, fewer than the total admitted in 1883 alone!

In the 1904 report of the *Paupers in Almshouses*, compiled and published by the United States Census Bureau, the Webster County Poor Farm reported a total of twenty-seven residents "enumerated" in December 1903. An additional five persons were admitted in 1904 and twelve were released. The population on January 1, 1905, totaled twenty. The majority of the residents were foreign-born and all were white.⁴⁸ The records of the *Infirmity Register*, listed in the table below, indicate fewer residents admitted in 1904, but the same number released.

Residents Admitted to the poor farm

| Year | Admitted | Released |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1900 | 4 | 4 |
| 1901 | 12 | 12 |
| 1902 | 8 | 8 |
| 1903 | 8 | 14 |
| 1904 | 2 | 12 |
| 1905 | 3 | 13 |
| Total | 37 | 63 |

Mentally ill residents continued to be added to the population at the poor farm in small numbers, but no large blocks of patients were transferred again by the supervisors until May 1917. Ensign's report of 1900 discussed the problems associated with the mixing of male and female residents. His observations appeared to have merit, for in June 1907 a forty-one year old mentally ill woman was transferred to the poor farm from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane with her eight month old daughter. Records indicate she stayed on the poor farm until March of the following year, when she and her daughter went to stay with her family in Fort Dodge.

Government regulation of poorhouses changed little during these years. In 1909 the legislature instituted a small change, renaming the "poorhouse" to county home. The amount of tax the county supervisors could levy for support of the poor was also increased from one mill to two mills on the dollar.⁴⁹

Debate over the care of the mentally ill continued. After the report of 1900, the Board of Control argued for the closing of all county insane asylums and the movement of all mentally ill into the state hospitals. By 1903 the board noted improvements at some institutions following its yearly inspections, but still advocated centralized care. In 1913 the General Assembly approved a bill which prevented patients whose relative or guardian paid for their support to be transferred to the county homes without written consent. In addition, patients could not be transferred from state hospitals to the county facilities without the signed consent of both the supervisors and the Board of Control. The legislature was responding to increased pressure to improve the conditions for care of the mentally ill at county facilities.⁵⁰

Although no early reports from the Board of Control have been located, suggestions for improving the quality of care for residents on the poor farm most certainly were part of the reports received by the board of supervisors.

Perhaps the suggestions made prompted a change in the direction of the county home when a new steward was hired to replace J.C. Savage in 1908. Account books from 1907 to 1917 provide another perspective of the operation of the poor farm during the prior ten years it had operated out of the house constructed in 1883. J.C. Savage reported these financial transactions in 1907:

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| J.C. Savage, Steward | |
| Products Sold | Total |
| 300 bu. Corn @ .30 | \$ 90.00 |
| 4 ton Hay @ 5.00 | 20.00 |
| Ice | .50 |
| Hogs— 18 @ 5.50 | 99.00 |
| Molasses—13 gal. @ .60 | 7.80 |
| Pasturage—20 head @ 2.25 | 45.00 |
| 4 horses, 6 months | 18.00 |
| 2 horses, 6 months | 9.00 |
| Corn | 50.80 |
| Coal | 6.00 |
| " " | 1.95 |
| " " | 6.35 |
| " " | 3.75 |
| Boar pig | <u>12.00</u> |
| Total | \$ 370.15 |

Disbursements

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Salaries and wages—O.A. Olson | \$ 75.00 |
| Gertie Lewis | 52.00 |
| Agnes Henzie | <u>11.50</u> |
| | 138.50 |
| Subsistence | 287.80 |
| Fuel/Light | 238.32 |
| Clothing | 27.14 |
| Repairs | 10.48 |
| All other | <u>141.29</u> |
| Total | \$ 859.63 ⁵¹ |

Although Savage failed to report his own salary, the last amount listed by the board of supervisors in 1883 set the salary at \$800 per year. In the following year, J.W. Ryan, the new steward, reported a salary of \$750 per year. He sold more products from the farm, but the disbursements almost quadrupled, bringing the total to almost \$4,000. Increases in salaries and the amount expended for subsistence increased the most dramatically. Accounts as reported in 1908:

Products sold were the same as those listed in 1907, but also include garden produce, oats, chickens, cream, butter, hides, and amount collected by supervisors (support by relatives, inmates).

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| | total \$ 890.75 |
| Disbursements | |
| Salaries and Wages— | \$1,261.05 |
| (J.W. Ryan \$750) | |
| Subsistence | 1,901.62 |
| Fuel/Light | 213.72 |
| Clothing | 285.84 |
| Furniture | 41.90 |
| Repairs | 237.77 |
| All other | <u>843.79</u> |

Total \$3,794.60⁵²

Steady increases in disbursements over the next nine years indicate that Ryan was instituting changes in the management of the county home. In 1909, his salary increased to \$900 per year, but the number of paid staff also rose from the three reported in 1907 to five.

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Salaries and Wages—J.W. Ryan | 900.00 |
| John Larson | 250.00 |
| Rosa Julio | 115.00 |
| Jessie Watson | 53.00 |
| Maime McIntyre | <u>64.00</u> |
| | \$1,390.00 ⁵³ |

Poor Farm Accounts Table*

| Year | Products Sold | Disbursements | Difference |
|------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| 1907 | 370.15 | 859.63 | -489.48 |
| 1908 | 890.75 | 3794.6 | -2903.84 |
| 1909 | 913.87 | 4157.76 | -3243.89 |
| 1910 | 1328.94 | 4330.93 | -3001.99 |
| 1911 | 2167.3 | 5033.24 | -2865.94 |
| 1912 | 3363.82 | 4019.4 | -655.58 |
| 1913 | 2497.36 | 4681.35 | -2183.99 |
| 1914 | 2955.96 | 5969.54 | -3013.58 |
| 1915 | 2808.45 | 5881.6 | -3073.15 |
| 1916 | 3130.56 | 6872.24 | -3741.68 |
| 1917 | 3344.28 | 10993.03 | -7648.75 |

*compiled from Poor Farm Account Books

As the table above shows, income from produce raised and sold at the county home

increased steadily between 1907 and 1917. Disbursements rose at an even more rapid pace, however, and with the exception of 1912 when income from sales soared to an all-time high, the farm was far from self-sufficient.

Admission numbers from these same years were low (see table below) when compared to the earlier years in which the number of admissions reached as many as thirty eight. With the exception of 1917, the county home served an average of ten persons per year between 1907 and 1917. An increased number of poor and mentally ill did not account for the drastic increase in the budget for the county home during this time period.

Numbers Admitted to poor farm*

| Year | Admitted | Released |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1907 | 12 | 9 |
| 1908 | 8 | 8 |
| 1909 | 4 | 6 |
| 1910 | 5 | 3 |
| 1911 | 10 | 4 |
| 1912 | 7 | 9 |
| 1913 | 2 | 2 |
| 1914 | 1 | 9 |
| 1915 | 26 | 29 |
| 1916 | 13 | 9 |
| 1917 | 50 | 18 |
| Total | 138 | 106 |

It is possible to suggest some reasons for the increase in budget even while the numbers being served were falling. Recommendations for improving conditions at the county home may have been forthcoming in the reports from the Board of Control. Improvements in the facilities, food, clothing and supervision of the residents could account for the increase in these areas of expenditures.

The addition of a paid professional Commissioner of the Poor, Miss Mabel Tibbets, in 1915 also indicates a change in the management of the poor and mentally ill in Webster County. Although Tibbetts was not listed as an employee of the county home, many orders for admission are attributed to her beginning in March 1915. The 1917 *Fort Dodge City Directory* indicates her position: "Commissioner of the Poor—Mabel Tibott."⁵⁴ The move toward professionalism in the

care of the poor had reached Webster County. Although the county board of supervisors continued to recommend residents for admittance to the county home, an increasing number of residents were sent there by Tibbotts (spelling of the name varies in the records).

The presence of Miss Tibbotts may also account for the brief return of women with children into the population of the county home. On March 18, 1915, a forty-seven year old German farm wife was admitted to the home with three children ages fourteen, eight and four. About three weeks later she was sent to the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane. Her fourteen year old daughter was transferred to the hospital for the "feeble-minded" at Glenwood. The eight year old son and four year old daughter were both transferred to the German Orphans Home. Later that year, a thirty-four year old woman was admitted with four children, ranging in age from two months to seven years. After spending one month at the home, three of the children were sent to an orphans home. The location of the home is unclear from the record, but it is possible that the children went to the German Lutheran Orphans Home in Fort Dodge. The youngest child and her mother left four days later for Wapello, Illinois. Why these seven young children passed briefly through the doors of the county home in 1915 is unclear. They were the first children to use the facility in fifteen years, and it was the last time in the period of history studied that young children were part of the population.

The remaining residents of the county home during the years between 1907 and 1917 continued to be young adults, old, ill and homeless whose lives had reached the point of desperation. The population of the county home was growing older however, as more elderly residents found this home to be their last. Some elderly married couples were admitted together. In many cases, one spouse died and the other left to stay with relatives. For one pair of Swedish immigrants, admitted in October 1912, the county home would be their final resting place. Admitted at the ages of eighty and eighty-one, they died on the same day eighteen months later. They were buried in the Norwegian Cemetery. For another married couple admitted in 1915 at the ages of forty-six and sixty-three, the home would provide long-term sporadic care. Both husband and wife came and went from the county home until the husband died at the age of seventy-one. The record does not indicate what became of his wife. Twenty-five of the eighty-eight persons who entered the home between 1907 and 1916 died during their stay there.

In 1917 the county home again took on a new challenge. On May 29, 1917, twenty-nine mentally ill patients were transferred from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane to the

Webster County Home. Nineteen men and ten women, ranging in age from twenty-seven years to eighty-two years, descended in one large group on the staff and residents at the home. The frame structure completed in 1883 could not have been large enough to hold the additional population and to provide care for the numbers of poor and mentally ill already at the home. An explanation for this surge in population comes from the *Fort Dodge City Directory* of 1917. Two listings appear for the Webster County Home:

Webster Co. Home—4 mi. S of city, Steward, J.W. Ryan

Webster Co. Hosp. for Insane—4 Mi. S of city, Supt. Franklin Fox.⁵⁵

From this record, it appears that two buildings or programs were in use on the site in 1917. This would explain the large increase in operating expenses for 1917, when a deficit of over \$10,000 was recorded. The presence of separate staff, Supt. Fox and his wife, Mrs. Florence Fox, for the care of the insane indicates that an additional structure may have been present on the grounds.⁵⁶ It is quite likely that at least part of the new brick structure was occupied. It seems clear that the Board of Supervisors of Webster County had planned to resume responsibility for its mentally ill patients in an effort to reduce costs. The new building, staff and the large block of transfer patients from the state hospital all point to careful planning by the supervisors. Since the Board of Control was required by law to approve the transfer, the facility at the Webster County Home must have met their high standards for the care of the mentally ill.

The twenty-nine patients transferred on that fateful day in May 1917 shared an array of history with institutional care. One man, whose age is not listed, was sent to the Independence State Hospital in June 1898. He was later transferred to Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane when it opened in 1903 and came to the county home after nineteen years of institutional care. The home records fail to indicate his final fate. For many patients, the county home became their last institutional stop. For one man, the stay was brief; he died after one month at the county home. He had spent the last ten years of his life as a patient at the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane, except for one day in 1907 when the record indicates that he escaped from the hospital. He was returned the following day.

For others the county home was part of their lives for many years. One German immigrant was admitted to the state hospital in 1899 and at the age of forty-four, transferred to Webster County Home. He remained on the farm until his death in 1953 at the age of eighty. He spent the last fifty-four years of his life in institutional care. An equally long story of institutional

care was recorded for another man who was sent to the Knoxville Hospital for Inebriates in 1910. He bounced between Knoxville and the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane until his transfer to the county home in May 1917. After a brief return to the state hospital in 1959, he returned to the county home. He remained at least through 1963, when at age eighty-four, he was featured in a newspaper article describing the history of the county home. The reporter noted that this man was both the oldest resident of the home and the resident who had been in placement for the longest period of time.⁵⁷ By 1963, fifty-three of his eighty-four years had been spent in institutional care, forty-seven of those at the county home.

Fate of 1917 Cherokee Transfer Patients

| | |
|---------------|-----------|
| Other Care | 3 |
| Cherokee | 2 |
| Died | 16 |
| Cherokee/back | 2 |
| Unknown | 6 |
| Total | 29 |

For several patients, the transfer to the county home was incentive for their families to assume their care. One man spent only thirteen days at the home, then was transferred into the care of his family. For others, the presence of family members in Fort Dodge prompted home staff to hint in their comments about the lack of attention paid to patients. One woman, transferred from Cherokee, gave rise to these comments:

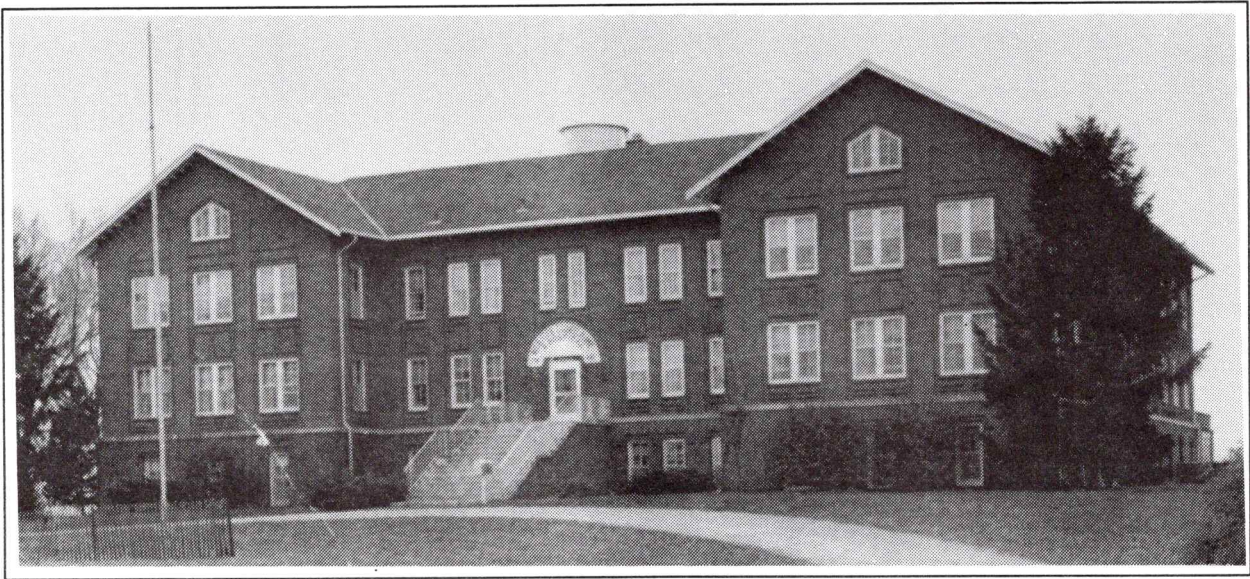
physically health good, poor mentally. Husband at Ft. Dodge, IA. Unable to support wife and is married again. Florist wife is patient's sister. She has three sisters and mother living in Ft. Dodge, Ia. at the family home. Mr. Ryan listed her age as 50 years. She is divorced from husband, born in Germany. Parents born in Germany. Time in U.S.—40 years. No time admitted to hospital. Her time in hospital, 20 years, 5 months.

The patient died at the home in March 1958. She spent sixty-one of her ninety-one years in institutional care. Another woman, the daughter of a "wealthy" citizen, according to the staff comments, was sent to Cherokee in June 1904. By the time she arrived at the county home in 1917, she had been paroled, discharged and returned to Cherokee ten times. She remained at the home until 1940, when she was returned once again to the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane.

In October 1917 the county supervisors and the Board of Control approved another transfer of five mentally ill patients from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane to the county home. Among the five was a thirty-nine year old man who had already spent nine years at Cherokee. This man remained at the county home until his death in November 1962, except for a brief return to Cherokee in 1959. At least fifty-four of his eighty-four years were spent in institutional care.

By committing their resources to long-term care of the mentally ill, the Webster County Board of Supervisors once again altered the mission of the county home. The new building, a brick three-story with several separate wings for the care of its patients, ushered in an era of professional care of the poor and mentally ill. The move from the home-like surroundings of the old frame house to the clean lines and long corridors of the new hospital-like building must have been a difficult transition for many of the long-term residents whose lives extended across building eras and changes in the nature of their care.

The Third Building, 1916-1940



The new building, constructed of hard-fired red brick, was a substantial change from the first two buildings constructed on the site of the county home. A large three-story rectangular mass was flanked on both sides with parallel wings of equal size. The building was built for a capacity of 110 patients. The ground floor housed the kitchen, laundry and food storage for the home. The central portion of the second story served as the living quarters for the home's steward and his family. Initially, other staff lived in this building and later in trailer houses on the site. The steward lived on the site until after 1963, but other members of the staff moved off-site in 1962.⁵⁸

The wings of the building must have been designed for the four major types of people who lived at the home—poor men, poor women, mentally ill men and mentally ill women. This arrangement would have met with the standards of care which the Board of Control promoted throughout the state.

In 1917 it appeared that the county was operating two separate institutions on the same site, one for the poor and one for the mentally ill. These separate designations disappeared from the *Fort Dodge City Directory* in 1918, as did the role of Mr. & Mrs. Fox as caretakers of the insane.⁵⁹ Perhaps with the completion of the new building, the old structure was removed and the supervisors returned responsibility of the farm and home to J.W. Ryan as steward.

Unlike the first two county poor farm buildings, the first resident admitted to the newly completed structure was not a young woman with young children in tow. Instead, a sixty-three

year old French immigrant with an alcohol-related disease was the first admitted in January 1918. Records indicate he was treated for alcoholism in Knoxville seven years earlier and then released. He died two months after he was admitted to the home.

Nineteen other county residents were admitted to the new county home in the first year. The records are more descriptive than in previous years, so the variety of reasons for being sent to the county home become more apparent. Three of the patients, a thirty-five year old man, eighty-seven year old man and a forty-nine year old woman, are described as "simple-minded"; two women, perhaps mother and daughter or sisters, are described as "epileptic", two women as "invalids", two men as "tramps". One woman, described as "simple-minded," lived at the county home until her death in February 1960 at the age of ninety-one. One man, a twenty-nine year old Russian immigrant, was admitted to the home because he was blind. One month later he was transferred to the state "Home for the Blind at Vinton, Iowa". Another man apparently admitted in November 1918 with a physical ailment was transferred one month later to the Kime Sanitarium, a private hospital located near Fort Dodge. No reason for admittance is recorded for eight of the persons admitted to the home in 1918.

In the *Annual Inventory and Report of the County Home* for 1918, J.W. Ryan, the steward, gives the following account of the state of the new Webster County Home:

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|----------|
| Expenditures: | | |
| Salary Steward | | \$ 1,200 |
| Others (summarized) | | 11,744 |
| Receipts: | | |
| Produce Sold (summarized) | | 4,732 |

| | Poor | Insane | Total |
|---------------------|------|--------|-------|
| # of Inmates | 23 | 36 | 59 |
| Received | 20 | 0 | 20 |
| Discharged | 7 | 0 | 7 |
| Removed | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Died | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| End | 33 | 34 | 67 |

Cost Per Month \$8.47 (per inmate)⁶⁰

By the end of 1918, almost one-half of the persons residing at the county home were mentally ill. Most of these were transferred from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane in

an attempt to save the county money. The cost to the county for care of the mentally ill at Cherokee was about \$45.00 per month. The cost reported by Steward Ryan was \$8.47, so the savings to the county was substantial.

In addition to this state-of-the-art county home, Webster County was beginning to offer more options for the care of the poor and mentally ill in the county. The December 1918 patient transfer from the county home to the Kime Sanitarium is the first one recorded in the history of the county home. The sanitarium operated by Dr. J.W. Kime was operating as early as 1903, according to the *Fort Dodge City Directory*. It was located half mile north of the city limits.

The German Lutheran Orphans Home was located in the city of Fort Dodge as early as 1903, but from the *Infirmity Register* it is difficult to ascertain whether young children were placed there from the county home since the comments often just note "went to orphans home." St. Joseph Mercy Hospital also began to serve as a treatment center for physically ill patients of the county home.

By 1918 the State of Iowa began to provide more options for the poor who needed special care. The Institution for Feeble-minded Children at Glenwood, the Hospital for Epileptics and Feeble-minded at Woodward and four hospitals for the insane at Cherokee, Clarinda, Independence, and Mount Pleasant all provided care at the taxpayers' expense. In Knoxville, treatment for alcoholism was provided for the poor. Elderly veterans were transferred to the soldiers homes in Des Moines or Davenport.

Increasing use of other institutions, hospitals and homes indicates that philosophy was changing regarding the care of the poor and mentally ill across the state. Perhaps the constant emphasis on treatment through work, exercise and recreation that the Board of Control recommended in its reports was coming to fruition. The fact that the science of medicine was slowly moving toward a better understanding and treatment of illnesses and the presence of the professional social worker both worked together to usher in a new attitude toward the residents of the county home. The poor were slowly granted access to better treatment, better facilities and new attitudes about the nature of their conditions.

However, many hurdles remained for the staff and residents of the new county home. At the end of his Annual Inventory and Report for 1918, J.W. Ryan made this recommendation to the county supervisors:

I would recommend that no one except legal residents

of the county be admitted to this home. Tramps and jailbirds should be furnished transportation and sent on.

J.W. Ryan
Steward"⁶¹

Although only two of the nineteen persons admitted in 1918 were listed as "tramps", Ryan expressed frustration with the number of homeless for whom the county home offered temporary shelter. Perhaps the board of supervisors acted on Ryan's recommendation. While the number of persons admitted to the home in 1919 increased to twenty-seven, all but five of those persons were transferred from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane. None of the five were described as "tramps" by the home staff. One young woman was admitted with two infants in March 1919. The Monthly Report notes that her husband living at Otho was responsible for her support. All three left the home after ten days. The reason for the admission of the other three persons, a woman and two men, is not known.

With twenty-nine transfer patients from Cherokee from 1917 already in the home, this additional twenty-two patients focused the attention of the staff on the care of the mentally ill. Of the twenty-two transferred in 1919, five were eventually returned to Cherokee, seven died at the home, one received other home care and the fate of the remaining nine is not known.

By the end of 1919, J.W. Ryan's Annual Steward's Report reflected the changing nature of the county home:

Expenditures:

| | |
|---------------------|----------|
| Salary Steward | \$ 1,800 |
| Others (summarized) | 13,091 |

Receipts:

| | |
|---------------------------|--------|
| Produce Sold (summarized) | 11,444 |
|---------------------------|--------|

| | Poor | Insane | Total |
|--------------|------|--------|-------|
| # of Inmates | 33 | 34 | 67 |
| Received | 6 | 14 | 20 |
| Discharged | 5 | 0 | 5 |
| Removed | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Died | 6 | 0 | 6 |
| End | 26 | 46 | 72 |

Cost Per Month \$1.96 (per inmate)⁶²

By the end of 1919, mentally ill patients made up almost two-thirds of the population at

the county home. The number of poor dropped dramatically and remained below the population of the mentally ill for nine years until the effects of the the great depression brought more poor people to the county home for relief.

The monthly cost of providing for each resident dropped almost \$6.50 between 1918 and 1919 despite a \$600 per year increase in salary for the steward. Better crops and farm prices must account for the large increase in the receipts from products sold. For the residents of the county home, life revolved around daily work and a limited amount of recreation. Steward Ryan gives this description of daily life in his Report for January 1919:

Note from Steward:

The condition of the home generally is good. Well heated, lighted and ventilated and in good sanitary condition. The inmates are in good condition physically with very little sickness. They are provided with three meals a day of good substantial food, consisting of cereals, meats, fish, vegetables, bread, butter, syrup, fruits, coffee, tea and milk. They have good warm clothing, heavy underwear, which are changed once a week and oftener when necessary. The men's work consists of chopping wood, hauling hay, coal, ice and etc. and the women's work consists of sweeping, scrubbing, making their beds, washing dishes, helping prepare meals, working in the laundry and etc. Those not able to work are taken out for exercise when the weather permits.

J.W. Ryan
Steward⁶³

During the 1920s, the county home continued to serve as a brief shelter for working men and women who were unemployed, injured or down on their luck. An increasing number of older residents came to the home for care in their later years. Forty-four percent of the residents admitted over the age of sixty died at the home (thirty-two of seventy-two). The fate of twenty-one of these older residents is unrecorded, so the actual number of those who died at the home may be higher.

Ages of Residents Admitted between 1920 and 1929

| under 20 | 20-40 | 40-60 | 60-80 | over 80 | unknown |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| 1 | 11 | 26 | 65 | 7 | 3 |

On several occasions, poor, elderly, married couples were admitted to the home together. They often remained until their deaths. In November 1921, a married couple in their seventies joined the other residents at the county home. Five months after admission the husband died, and the wife left for parts unknown seven days later. Young married couples often passed through the doors of the county home briefly, perhaps when they fell on hard times. For one young couple aged thirty-three and thirty-five, who arrived in 1929, this would be their last home. After the death of his wife in 1934, the husband lived the remaining eighteen years of his life at the home where he died in 1948.

The home was also refuge for some colorful characters who even the staff felt did not belong at the facility. A sixty-six year old homeless man admitted on May 29, 1920, prompted these comments from the staff: "This is supposed to be the wild man who scared the city of Badger, sent here by order of Miss Tibbotts."⁶⁴ The record does not indicate what became of this man.

The impact of alcohol-related diseases on the population of Webster County is difficult to determine from the records of the county home. Although alcohol may have been associated with the lives of some of the transients, admission based on alcohol abuse is not commonly recorded by the home staff. When mentioned, it is often regarded with disgust in the comments of the home staff. One man admitted in 1919 at the age of sixty-five returned to the county home time after time with an alcohol-related ailment. The comments of the staff give us some insight into his experiences until his death at the home at the age of eighty-six:

| | |
|----------|--|
| 12-31-29 | "Down and out , not much good" |
| 4-9-30 | "Left to live with son-in-law in Ft. Dodge" |
| 9-3-30 | "Very sick & nervous caused from excessive drinking" |
| 7-20-31 | "Left to work in Ft. Dodge, Iowa" |
| 8-28-31 | "Came back, sick and nervous caused from drinking moonshine" |
| 4-12-36 | "Left to work in Ft. Dodge" |
| 4-18-36 | "Came back" |
| 6-18-36 | "Came back, was picked up for being drunk & begging for food" |
| 7-18-36 | "Left, got his pension" |
| 7-17-39 | "Came back, pension taken from him on account of drinking. Drunk & dirty when he came back." |
| 6-12-42 | "Left" |
| 2-12-50 | "Passed away at 9:45 PM" ⁶⁵ |

The number of poor residents admitted to the county home exceeded the number of mentally ill by about four to one in the 1920s (see table below), yet at the end of 1929, Steward Ryan reported thirty-three poor residents and forty mentally ill residents were living at the home.

Numbers Admitted, Released and Died at County Home

| Year | Poor Add. | "Insane Add. | Left | Died | # at Home |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|------|------|-----------|
| 1920 | 13 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 77 |
| 1921 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 74 |
| 1922 | 11 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 78 |
| 1923 | 8 | 13 | 2 | 9 | 88 |
| 1924 | 10 | 0 | 15 | 3 | 79 |
| 1925 | 13 | 0 | 14 | 5 | 69 |
| 1926 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 74 |
| 1927 | 14 | 0 | 10 | 3 | 78 |
| 1928 | 30 | 3 | 29 | 7 | 75 |
| 1929 | 26 | 8 | 29 | 8 | 73 |
| Total | 146 | 32 | 110 | 60 | 765 |

Poor residents of the county used the home for temporary and short-term placement, while the county home provided long-term care for the mentally ill. For most mentally ill patients, the state hospitals were the first institutions encountered. Frequently, after many years in state institutions, the mentally ill were transferred to county homes for long-term care. Mentally ill patients who were considered chronic and untreatable were recommended by the Board of Control for transfer to a county facility.

Poor residents of the county also relied on the continuing trend of outdoor relief. Women with young children virtually disappeared from the county home population after the turn of the century. Outdoor relief became the preferred method of caring for children and deserted or widowed mothers. In 1921, the board of supervisors considered requests for outdoor poor relief at almost every monthly meeting. In October 1921, five women were granted "widow's pensions" by the board. Most received \$3.00 per week (per child).⁶⁶ These costs were significantly higher than the \$6.65 per month it cost the county to care for a resident at the county home.

The amount awarded to widowed mothers varied by year as well. In January 1921, the board approved support for thirty-five women with children. Payments ranged from five to ten dollars per month with some women supporting one child on five dollars and one woman

supporting eight children on ten dollars per month. Board minutes note that support was granted for two years or until the child reached the age of sixteen. Support also was stopped if the woman remarried or moved out of the county.⁶⁷

Men - perhaps with families - also received outdoor support from the county, but only one application is recorded in the minutes between 1921-24. This man received five dollars per month in 1921. The amount was increased to nine dollars per month in 1922.⁶⁸

The board of supervisors continued to approve the transfer of "insane" patients into and out of the county home. In August 1921, in response to a request for transfer of a patient, it was moved that "a request for removal of (female patient) at county home be rejected. Motion carried."⁶⁹ It isn't clear from the official minutes who made the request for removal, but it may have been a relative who wanted other care for the patient.

Capital improvements like the construction of a well in 1921 also occupied the supervisors' time. The well contract awarded to Thorpe Bros. of Des Moines called for the drilling of a 500+ foot well which would provide 50 gallons of water per minute. The contract was finalized in November 1921, and the well completed soon after.⁷⁰

In February 1924, the supervisors reviewed the county funds for the care of the poor and mentally ill. The following report was entered by the treasurer for the last 6 months of 1923:

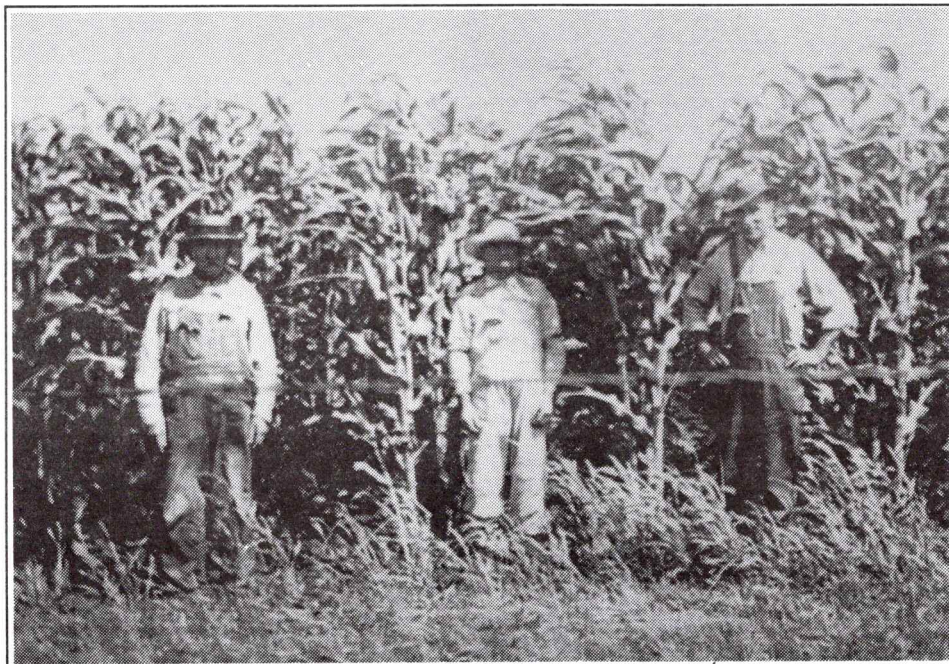
County Funds

| | |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Poor | \$ -6,951 |
| State Insane | 20,969 |
| County Insane | 12,776 |
| Soldier Relief | 2,355 ⁷¹ |

It is clear that the county home provided economical care for the poor, but the county was still spending much more than it had budgeted on the county home and outdoor relief for the poor. The 1924 Annual Report shows that residents were cared for at the home at a cost of \$3.34 per month.⁷² The cost of outdoor relief was three or four times this amount per month. Public sentiment concerning the proper care of women with dependent children, veteran soldiers and orphaned children supported those people receiving outdoor relief. The unmarried, childless and elderly were sent to the county home.

By the end of the 1920s, the number of poor entering the home soared. The rise in number, from an average of eleven new poor residents per year between 1920 and 1927 to thirty in 1928 and twenty-six in 1929, likely reflects the growing agricultural depression that hit the nation in the 1920s. The impact must have been felt by the older population first, as twenty-three

of the poor residents admitted in 1928 and 1929 were in their 50s and 60s, eight were in their 70s and six were over 80 years old.⁷³ The number of poor entering the home would remain high throughout the great depression years of the 1930s peaking at sixty-three new resident poor in 1937. Residents continued to be predominantly male, over the age of fifty and either out of work, injured or recovering from a physical illness when they entered the county home. As the mobility of the population increased in the 1930s and as displaced farmers and business persons searched for new means of support, the number of poor that moved through the county home increased as well.



Numbers admitted to County Home, 1931-1940

| Year | Poor Add. | "Insane" Add. | Left | Died | # at Home |
|--------------|------------|---------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| 1931 | 29 | 15 | 20 | 8 | 83 |
| 1932 | 26 | 5 | 19 | * | 95 |
| 1933 | 21 | 9 | 16 | 17 | 92 |
| 1934 | 41 | 2 | 39 | 17 | 79 |
| 1935 | 78 | ** | 36 | 11*** | 82 |
| 1936 | 36 | 0 | 41 | 5 | 72 |
| 1937 | 63 | 0 | 33 | 9 | 94 |
| 1938 | 56 | 1 | 40 | 16 | 95 |
| 1939 | 44 | 27 | 41 | 16 | 109 |
| 1940 | 41 | 1 | 31 | 15 | 105 |
| Total | 435 | 60 | 316 | 114 | |

*unknown: ** total combined with Poor admitted: ***3 persons missing due to poor records.

The ethnic heritage of persons admitted to the county home was not recorded in the records after 1918 except for African-Americans. Five African-Americans were admitted to the county home between 1931 and 1940, a fraction of the total number of poor and mentally ill who used the facility. The chart below summarizes the records of African-American residents on the poor farm and county home. Most died on the farm after relatively short stays.

African-Americans Admitted and Discharged, 1881-1939

| Date Admitted | Sex | Reason | Age | Left Farm | Buried on Farm |
|---------------|-----|----------------|-----|-----------|----------------|
| 3/17/81 | M | Unknown | 20 | Died | Unknown |
| 5/18/96 | F | Unknown | 26 | Left | No |
| 4/15/97 | M | Unknown | 38 | Died | Yes |
| 1/27/31 | F | Cherokee Hosp. | 38 | Died | Yes |
| 1/8/32 | M | Poor | 67 | Died | No |
| 11/14/34 | M | Physical Ill | 74 | Died | No |
| 10/8/38 | M | Physical Ill | 61 | Left | No |
| 8/16/39 | M | Physical Ill | 53 | Died | Yes |

One African-American female was admitted to the home after being transferred from the Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane in 1931. She was the only African-American in the records under study who was transferred back to the home after spending time in the state hospital. Admitted to Cherokee in 1910, she died at the home in 1946 and was buried in the County Home Cemetery. She was part of a larger group of thirteen patients transferred in a block on January 27, 1931 to the county home from Cherokee. Eight of the thirteen died at the home, three were transferred back to Cherokee and the fate of the other two is not recorded.

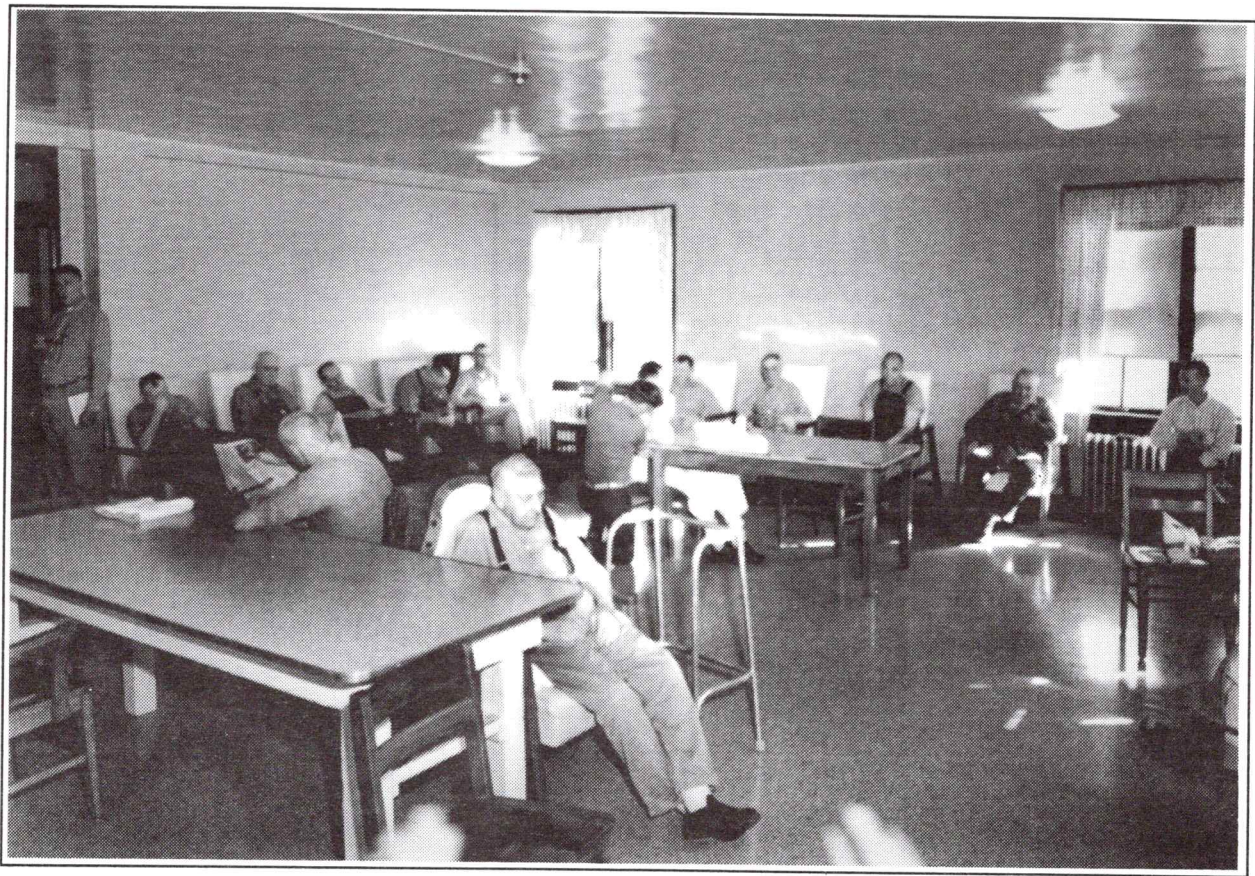
The next large transfer of patients from Cherokee to the county home did not occur until 1939. In December of that year, ten new patients from Cherokee arrived at the county home. Four of these patients died at the home, all spending at least ten years there, two returned to Cherokee within fourteen months, two left for other home care and one simply left the home, his destination unrecorded. The remaining seventeen mentally ill patients who entered the county home in 1939 were not transfers from the state hospital, but were admitted directly by county officials.⁷⁴ Other mentally ill residents had been admitted directly by the county supervisors in the past, but the number seldom reached more than three or four in one year.



Life at the county home in the 1930s changed little from its earlier years. Despite the large number of persons using the home for relief from injury and unemployment, the residents continued to contribute to the daily tasks of raising crops, cleaning, cooking, baking and caring for the livestock. In November 1934, a reporter from the *The Fort Dodge Messenger and Chronicle* visited the county home and published a description of the people and the place. Excerpts of the description give some insight into life at the home for the people who lived there:

The Webster County Home, where almost a hundred aged men and women are passing the declining years of their lives, is a little community virtually sufficient in itself and almost as completely independent of the outside world as were the homesteads of the first Iowa Settlers....

At present the farm has ninety-two inmates, seventy men and twenty-two women. The two sexes live their lives almost completely apart. They are housed in separate wings, eat their meals in separate dining rooms, and have their recreation and work rooms in separate quarters.



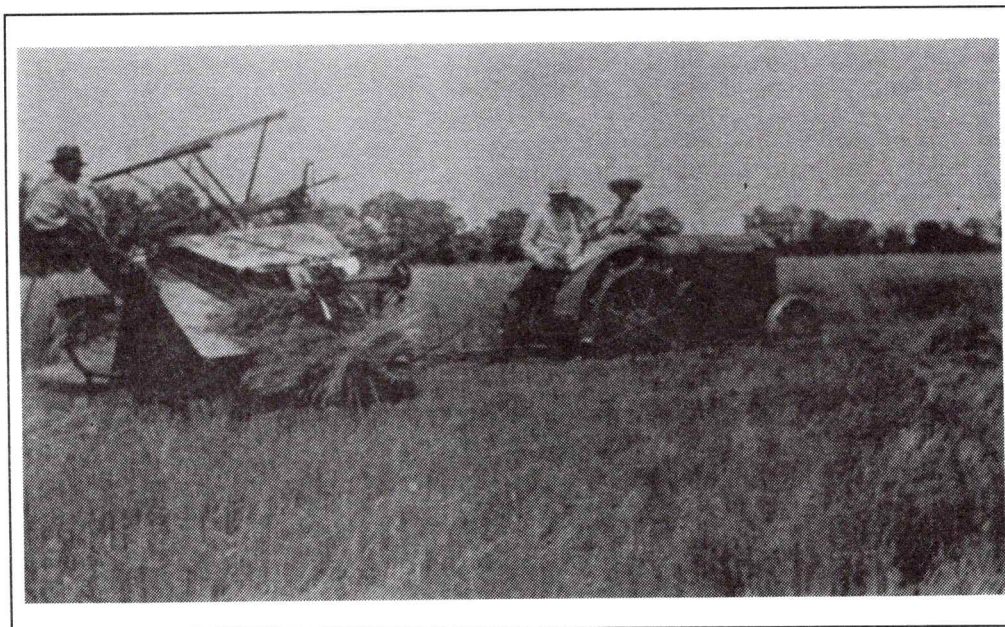
In recent years, the county has kept some insane patients at the county farm. The cases are the most serious mental ailments, generally those who are perfectly normal in all other respects but have lost the faculty of caring for themselves. At present there are seventeen women insane patients, and fourteen men. They are segregated from the rest, for there is an insane ward for the women and another for the men...



The men pick potatoes, cultivate the garden and tobacco crops, husk corn, care for the beautifully-landscaped lawns, carry water, churn butter, milk the cows, clean the farm building and perform numerous other chores.

The women, under the direction of the kitchen employees, prepare vegetables for cooking, mend clothing, clean the living quarters, wash dishes, etc...Both men and women are responsible for the care of their dormitories.⁷⁵

In addition to the work of the residents, this reporter describes the responsibilities of the five-member staff at the home and its Superintendent, S.P. Carroll. It isn't clear when Carroll took over the home from J.W. Ryan. Ryan remained as steward until at least 1922, when the board of supervisors increased his salary to \$2,400.⁷⁶ The steward's salary dropped from \$2,700 in 1933 to \$1,276 in 1934 which may indicate a change in the management position. The salary dropped radically in 1935 to \$700 when Louis R. Rolow became the county home steward. This low salary may have been for only a portion of the year for in 1935 it increased to \$1,305. Like other stewards, Rolow's salary included compensation for his wife's role as county home matron. Rolow remained as steward at the home until his death in 1957, when his son William assumed the role.⁷⁷



The variety of food raised and consumed on the county farm added dimension to the daily lives of the residents. Bread, 180 loaves every other day, was baked by the kitchen workers. Butter, cream, pork, beef, milk, chicken, turkey, eggs and garden produce including string beans, peas, beets, cabbage, carrots, eggplant, pickles, turnips, rutabagas and potatoes were mentioned by the reporter. The food seemed plentiful, the clothing warm, the rooms clean and the people

well contented. Leisure activities included billiards, reading, crafts, needlework and embroidery. All in all, the reporter found a pleasant, if isolated, home where the elderly, mildly mentally ill and desperate spent their days.



The image of the home as a place where the poor and outcast of the county came to spend their last years suggested in the *Messenger* article in 1934 did not account for the great numbers of people who spent a short portion of their lives in the county home and then moved. The transient population of the county also had a connection with the county home that began as early as the first reference in the *Infirmary Register* to a "tramp", and continued with the complaint of Steward Ryan in 1918, when he suggested that transients be given money for transport and sent onward.

For some like the man first admitted to the home in June 1935, the comments in the *Patients Records* give us some insight as to the role the county home played in providing temporary shelter:

| | |
|---------|--|
| 6-29-35 | "(male resident) was brought here by Police. Picked him up along railroad tracks in a filthy condition, dirty clothes, buggy, hardly able to walk. Was starved to death shoulders had pits where the bugs bit him, seems to be a man around 60. No relatives." |
| 3-2-36 | "left" |
| 1-4-37 | "came back 1-4-37 just as dirty as ever" |

| | |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| 4-18-38 | "left" |
| 1-30-39 | "Came back just as dirty as ever" |
| 5-1-39 | "Left to bum" |
| 8-4-40 | "Came back worse than ever" |
| 3-31-41 | "left to bum" ⁷⁸ |

The county home provided medical care, new clothes and a clean beginning for this man, yet his behavior continued. The record does not track his movements after 1941, so his final fate is unknown.

Treatment for the poor at the county home involved work, isolation from the opposite sex, good food and exercise. The staff, while dedicated care-givers, were not professional social workers or doctors. A nurse was employed at the home beginning in the 1920s. Doctors were called in as needed, and residents were transported to local hospitals for care of physical ailments when needed.

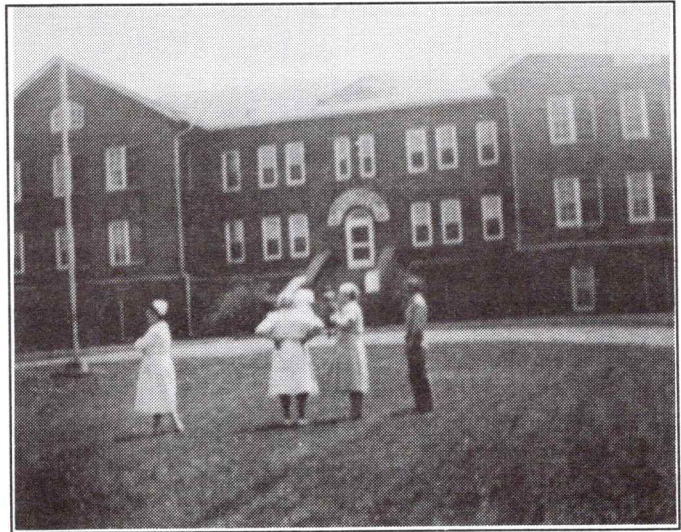
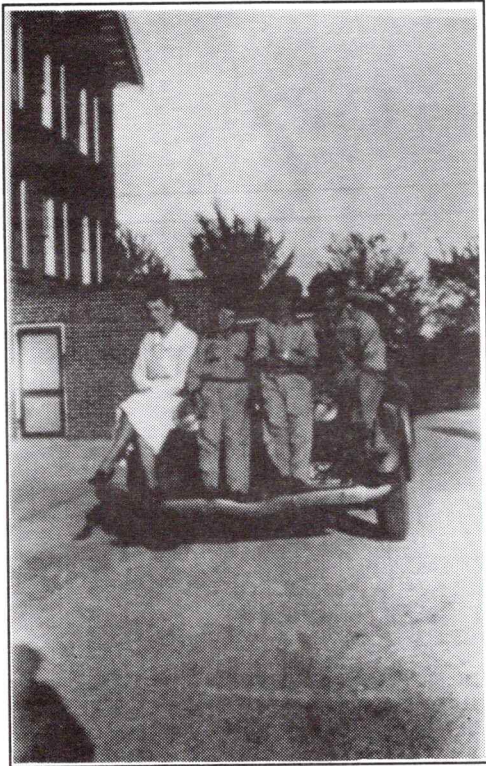
Doctor's comments provide additional insight into the care of the poor and mentally ill in the county home. The physical and mental condition of a seventy-one year old woman admitted in April 1930 is found in the comments of the home staff. She is described as "badly bruised on her back and arm...had a bad fall, very hysterical. Has been inmate at Cherokee State Hospital for the Insane. Husband dead. Has sister at Lehigh." When the doctor was called one month later, he too described her condition:

"found (patient) with a broken wrist, Colle's fracture—result of fall. Mentally very deranged. Reduced & splinted Colle's fracture which owing to relaxed condition was easily accomplished. She was given general care and very careful attention by Mrs. Martin (nurse) before my arrival and during my visit. She was very anemic. I visited Home at 2:25 and found that the most exacting care and attention was given the patient and that she peacefully passed away.

E.D. Russell, M.D.⁷⁹

The patient died the day of the doctor's visit and was buried in the County Home Cemetery.

A *Messenger* report of 1934 gave the county home a glowing report in food, clothing, care and attention it gave to its residents. The only remaining Inspection Report conducted by the Board of Control in 1942 confirms the *Messenger's* findings. The report lists Louis Rolow as steward and his wife as matron at a combined salary of \$2,700 per year. Additional staff included two nurses, two cooks, a house man, an attendant and night watchman and a farm hand.



All received room and board in addition to their monthly salaries, which ranged from \$35 to \$55. It is worthwhile to look at this report in some detail for it gives insight into the standards of quality that the State of Iowa was expecting in the care of the poor and mentally ill. After the tally of patients, "Insane, 23 male, 22 female: Poor, 21 male, 22 female," was complete, the list of questions and answers followed (abbreviated):

Number of insane who sleep in one room—19 in dormitory



Number of insane who work all day—0 male; 5 female

Number of insane who work 1/2 day—10 male; 6 female

Number of insane who work less than 1/2 day—4 male, 4 female

Number of insane unable to work—14

Number of insane who do not work—14

Name of insane person mechanically restrained or secluded and method—

(female) locked up for short intervals for quarreling with the other inmates;

(female) locked up for fighting. Neither one serious.

Number of insane not placed in restraint or seclusion—21 male, 20 female.

Describe clothing of each sex—women pretty print dresses and men ordinary work clothing—all clean and in good condition.

How often is underclothing of insane changed—once a week or oftener.

Facilities for bathing—tub.

How often bathed—once a week or oftener.

How many bathed in same water—one.

Describe daily exercise—men most of the day—women a good part of the afternoon.



Describe reading material and amusements—radio, chapel, newspapers, magazines, books, pool, cards, checkers, and fancy work.

Describe meals—Breakfast—pancakes, cream of wheat, bread, butter, syrup, coffee, milk.

Dinner—roast beef, brown gravy, potatoes, pickles, bread, butter, tea, milk.

Supper—fried potatoes, eggs, pickles, syrup, bread, butter, apple- sauce, tea, milk.

Officer or employee present during each meal served—yes.

Kinds of meat and proportion—60% beef; 40% pork with lots of eggs and chicken and fish on Friday.

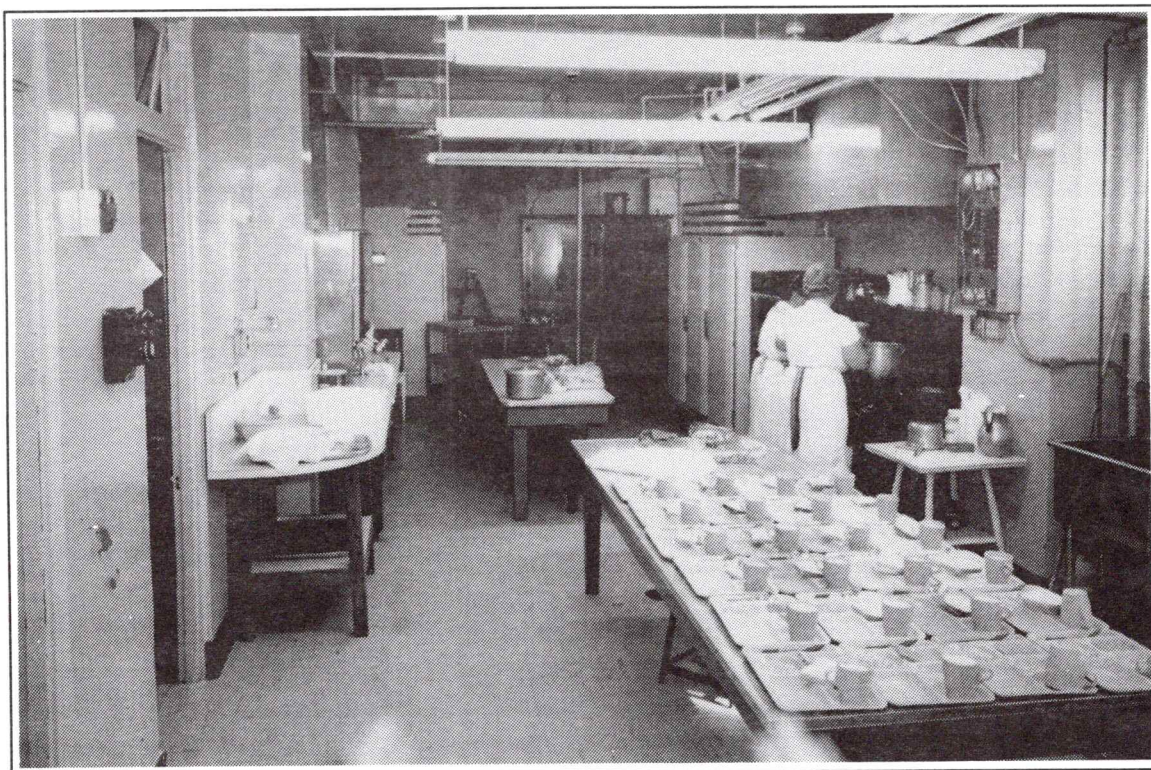
When furnished meat--always at dinner.

When butter served—all meals.

Practice of furnishing milk—all they want at every meal

When furnished tea and coffee—coffee for breakfast and tea for dinner and supper.

Who cooks—employees.



Describe the fire protection—city of Fort Dodge water supply with 99' water tank, 25,000 gallon with deep well, 100 gallon per minute pump; also arrangements with Fort Dodge Fire Dept., to come on call, about seven minutes away. Regulation fire hydrants.

Source of water—city of Fort Dodge and deep well.

Water adequate for fire—yes.

Describe system of sewerage—septic tank.

All bathrooms, etc. connected to sewer—yes.

Means of ventilation—windows and doors.

Artificial lighting—electric.

Heating system—steam heat with double boiler and stoker in good condition.

Sleeping rooms kept warm at night—moderate.

Conditions of rooms—Exceptionally good throughout; beds good, dormitories well ventilated, dining rooms and dining tables excellent; all floors good and a splendid kitchen.

Describe complaints/investigate--there were no complaints.

Comments—This is a very fine home. The Rolows are now just finishing their seventh year, April 1. They have been retained at an advanced salary for another year. This is a good home in every respect. Inmates receive good care and plenty of good food.

The board of supervisors are especially good to cooperate and make frequent visits to the home.

Lots of repainting and floor covering was done during the past year, and the home is in splendid condition.

No recommendations to be made here.⁸⁰

The Webster County Home rated quite well in this 1942 report. The residents were well fed, clothed, clean and were given work and recreation to occupy their time. Treatment for medical injuries seemed adequate, and the physical facility was in excellent shape. The home seemed to be doing its job quite well. The job had changed since the first frame home was built in 1874. The residents were older, more were mentally ill and the home was slowly moving towards becoming a long-term care center.

In the sixty-six years of this study, the poorhouse, poor farm and county home served at least 1,181 residents of the county. The stories of the residents provide a fascinating look at life for Webster County's unfortunate. Most had nowhere else to turn, and the county home provided them with food, clothing and shelter. Working on the farm may have been therapeutic for many long-term residents whose futures held little hope for independence and prosperity. Some may have acquired skills that led to meaningful employment.

There is little information about the staff of the county home in the records before 1940. The steward's comments and reports give us some insight into the attitudes of the staff on the county home. Most of the staff lived at the home in compartments adjacent to the residents. The steward and his family occupied the central portion of the 1916 structure, but where staff lived in earlier buildings is not known. The staff commitment to the home, farm and the care of its residents is rather remarkable. In the sixty-six years of this study, there were only four stewards. Louis Rolow who became the steward in 1935 remained at the home until his death in 1957, at which time management of the home passed to his son William. William had been raised on the farm and raised five children of his own there. For many long-term residents, the consistency of the staff must have been comforting. Rolow and his wife (the stewardess) left sometime between 1966 and 1973.

In a 1963 newspaper interview, William Rolow commented on the operation of the county home and hospital. "The need for funds is not as great as the need for visitors," Rolow says.

"Especially in January and February everything is so quiet," he notes.⁸¹ With these comments, Rolow forecast another change in the philosophy of caring for the poor and mentally ill in Webster County. The move to integrate residents into the community would bring more challenges to the county home and its staff. No longer would residents be "**buried on the farm.**" Instead, they would be encouraged to move into independent living quarters, attend public functions and mingle on the streets of Fort Dodge and other county towns.

Faced with continuous changes in regulations, state standards of care and the increased cost of health care, the Webster County Board of Supervisors voted to transfer the operation of the county home to a private not-for-profit corporation, Webster Health Care, Inc., in 1988. With that transfer, Webster County ended its role as a direct provider of residential services to the needy public.

Webster County Home History Project

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Includes timetable and dates of building construction, staff numbers, general summary of patient care.

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Infirmery Register No. 1. (Jan. 1874 -Dec. 22, 1916).

Includes names, dates, occupation, residency, remarks, nativity, admitting official, discharge information. Some pages missing.

(Webster County Home).

Record of Insane. (Dec. 1891-1917, partial), (Jan. 31, 1910)

(May 1917, partial).

Information similar to Infirmery Register above.

(Webster County Home).

Poor Farm Accounts. 1907-1917.

Receipts, disbursements, names, amounts, articles purchased.

(Webster County Home).

Account Book and Inventory. (1936-1969, monthly), (1960-1969, yearly).

Income, expenditures, annual inventory & report includes list of "inmates". Also includes list of people received, names, sex, comments, and deaths and releases.

(Webster County Home).

Account Book and Inventory. (1935-1943, yearly).

Same information as above.

Account Book. 1894-1898.

Local account register. Names, dates, amounts, merchandise.

(Webster County Home).

Account Book. (1935-1936).

Store accounts, purchases, amounts, other expenses.

(Webster County Home).

County Store Account Book. (1932-1936).

Daily and weekly report of supplies issued from County Store. Very detailed. Includes food

and some domestic supplies.
(Webster County Home).

Inventory of Year. (1940).

Lists land, equipment, furnishings, livestock, financial statement, lists the numbers of "poor" and "insane". Included note from Steward, Louis Rolow.
(Webster County Home).

Inventory of the Year. (1950).

Same as above, no note.
(Webster County Home).

Inventory of the Year. (1960).

Same as above, no note.
(Webster County Home).

Annual Inventory and Report. (1918-1935 and 1944-1959).

Livestock, produce, implements, furniture, supplies, number of "inmates". Many loose pages.
(Webster County Home**)
**also filed with County Auditor.

Physicians Records of Individual Treatment. (1917-1960s).

Loose pages numbering 100+. Names, dates, physician, treatment, disease.
(Webster County Home).

Physicians Records of Individual Treatment. (1935-1965).

Bound copy. Most from 1950s & 1960s. Names, dates, physician, treatment, disease.
(Webster County Home).

Visitor's Record. (1930-1941, complete), (1941-1966, spotty).

Dates, names, addresses. Also visits by Grand Jury, 1941-1966.
(Webster County Home).

County Store Supply Records. (1932-1934).

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(Webster County Home)

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Grand Jury Inspection visit follow-up letter.

Blueprints, "Floor Plan." The Webster County Home. The Griffith Company, Registered Architects, Box 917, Fort Dodge, IA.

No date, includes elevator, layout, room use. Pre 1967 addition?
(Webster County Home).

Blueprints, "Proposed Improvements." The Webster County Home. The Griffith Company, Registered Architects, Box 917, Fort Dodge, IA.

No date, includes elevator shaft drawings, layout, room use.
(Webster County Home).

Fort Dodge Messenger, 1937-1989, clippings from County Home Files.

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Includes a short description with a photo of Z.C.B.J. Hall.
(Fort Dodge Public Library).

Doan, William Sayles. A Book of Days. Fort Dodge, Iowa: The Messenger, 1991.

Includes photos of Ft. Dodge ca. 1870-1990 (home not pictured). (Fort Dodge Public Library).

Fort Dodge City Directory, 1928-1991.

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Standard Atlas of Webster County, Iowa. Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., publishers and engravers, 1909. p. 59

Plat of Elkhorn township. "Webster Co. Poor Farm—Home of J.C. Savage."
(Fort Dodge Public Library).

Atlas of Webster County and the World. Des Moines, Iowa: Anderson Publishing Co., 1923.

Maps of each township, farmers directory. County home in Elkhorn township.
(Webster County Home).

¹ Information about residents was gathered from the *Infirmity Register*, records of the *Webster County Insane and Feeble-minded*, and *Patient Reports* and placed in a database. Unless otherwise noted, all reference to patient information is from this source. Names have been deleted to protect the privacy of the individuals.

² *Infirmity Register*, p. 1-2.

³ Shambaugh, *Applied History*, V. II, p.144.

⁴ *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Thursday, Oct.10,1872, p. 8.

⁵ *ibid*, Thursday, Nov.14, 1872, p.1

⁶ *ibid*, Thursday, Oct. 23, 1873, p.1

⁷ *ibid*, Thursday, Nov. 6, 1873, p. 1

⁸ *ibid*, Thursday, Dec. 25, 1873, p. 1

⁹ *ibid*, Thursday, Feb. 5, 1874, p.2

¹⁰ Gillin, *History of Poor Relief Legislation in Iowa*, p.143.

¹¹ *ibid*, Thursday, Apr. 30, 1874, p.2

¹² Gillin, *Poor Relief*, p. 175.

¹³ *ibid*, p. 176

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 246

¹⁵ *Webster County Gazette*, Friday, Apr. 12, 1878, p.1

¹⁶ *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Thursday, Apr. 30, 1874, p.2

¹⁷ Gillins, *Poor Relief*, p. 179.

¹⁸ *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Apr.12, 1878, p.1.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 6

²⁰ *Webster County Gazette*, 10-25-1878, p.1.

²¹ *Infirmity Register*, p. 14.

- 22 *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Jan. 27, 1882, p.4
- 23 *ibid*,
- 24 *ibid*,
- 25 *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Jan. 13, 1882, p.2 & Jan. 27, 1882, p.3
- 26 *Ibid*, Friday, Sept. 15, 1882, p.2
- 27 Jochimesen, *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Mar.31, 1978.
- 28 *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Dec.16, 1963, p. 12.
- 29 *ibid*, p.15
- 30 *Webster County Gazette*, Jan. 11, 1883, p.2
- 31 *Infirmiry Register*, p. 10
- 32 *ibid*,
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- 34 *ibid*,
- 35 *Scrapbook of News*, 1888, p. 4
- 36 *Infirmiry Register*, p. 10.
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- 38 *Infirmiry Register*, p. 14.
- 39 *ibid*, p. 14.
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- 41 Ensign, *The Care of the Insane in Iowa*, p. 1-13.
- 42 *ibid*, p. 18-19.
- 43 *ibid*, p. 20-21.
- 44 *ibid*, p.13-15.
- 45 *ibid*, p. 28
- 46 *ibid*, p. 30.
- 47 *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 27, 1893, p. 1.
- 48 *Paupers in Almshouses*, 1904, p. 65.
- 49 Gillin, p. 111.
- 50 *ibid*, p. 261
- 51 *Poor Farm Account Books*, 1907
- 52 *ibid*, 1908.

- 53 *ibid*, 1909.
- 54 *Fort Dodge City Directory*, 1917, p.4
- 55 *Fort Dodge City Directory*, 1917. p.16.
- 56 *ibid*. p. 120.
- 57 *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Dec.16,1963, p.12.
- 58 Carey, Dolores, *Fort Dodge Messenger*, 12-16-63. p. 12.
- 59 *Fort Dodge City Directory*, 1918.
- 60 *Annual Inventory and Report*,1918.
- 61 *Annual Inventory and Report for 1918*
- 62 *Inventory...1919.*
- 63 *Monthly Report*, Jan. 1919.
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- 65 *Patient records*, 1929.
- 66 *Supervisors' Minutes*, 10-4-21.
- 67 *ibid*. 1-3-22.
- 68 *ibid*. 11-14-21 & 6-15-22.
- 69 *ibid.*, 8-23-21.
- 70 *ibid*, 11-26-21.
- 71 *ibid*, 2-6-24.
- 72 *Annual report...*, 1924.
- 73 *Database*.
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- 75 *Fort Dodge Messenger & Chronicle*, Nov.1,1934.
- 76 *Supervisors' Minutes*, 1-6-22.
- 77 *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Aug.15,1949 & Dec.16,1963.
- 78 *Patient Records*, 1935.
- 79 *Patient records*, 1930.
- 80 *Report of Inspection of County and Private Institutions in Which Insane are Kept*, 1-29-42.
- 81 Carey, Delorese, *Fort Dodge Messenger*, Dec.16,1963, p.13.

